

JEEVADHARA

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

CHURCH AS PEOPLES MOVEMENT

PEOPLES MOVEMENTS IN INDIA TODAY AND THE
MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Stan Lourdusamy

ISRAEL AS A PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT FOR LIBERATION

George Koonthanam

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John Sunderaj Augustine

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JEEVADHARA

The People of God

CHURCH AS PEOPLES MOVEMENT

Editor

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Editorial

The Church (*ekklesia*) originally meant a movement, gathering, assembly, community of people gathered in response to God's call in Jesus Christ. It was understood as a horizontal movement of people, grounded on the vertical — on the call and covenant of God in Jesus Christ. But gradually the Church became a religious institution on the political pattern, a hierarchical institution with a pyramidal structure with the Pope and the Bishops at the apex. Vatican II rediscovered the concept of the Church as the People of God, as a Peoples Movement under the guidance of the Spirit of the Risen Lord. The Church is called to be a sign and sacrament of the Kingdom of God which is the ultimate destiny of mankind, the new heaven and the new earth. This number of *Jeevadhara* focuses on this contemporary thrust of the Church as a Peoples Movement.

The real Church is there where people are gathered together by God to fight for freedom and justice, and thus to create an equitable, responsible and participative human community. Stan Lourdusamy depicts the contours of this anonymous Church in India, identifying the different peoples movements which are practically disowned by both the ruling party and the left-wing opposition parties. What is the mission of the Church in the context of these peoples movements? The Church should become politically conscious and involved. It should side with the exploited masses and participate in their struggles, joining hands with all civic and democratic forces, especially with the socialist movement. The institutionalized Church in India may find it incapable of playing this political role. Individual Christians and smaller groups should become the avant-garde and play this political role.

The history of Israel is the story of a people's movement in the Old Testament. George Koonthanam makes a historical survey of Israel's movement for freedom and integral development all through its history - the movement of the Patriarchs in search of fresh pastures or freedom and development, the exodus as the great

triumph of a powerless people, and the conquest of Palestine as the victory of the peasants for their birthright of land. But the establishment of monarchy in Israel was a death-blow to the movement with the consequence of oppression and exploitation of the people. They had to pay its price once again in slavery and exile. At a time when oppression and misery of the common people reached its climax in the Hellenistic and Roman dominations, Jesus came to the scene, announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God. George Soares-Prabhu traces back the radical origins of the Jesus Movement or Jesus Community. Jesus preached and worked among the poor, the oppressed and the suffering, among tax-collectors, sinners and prostitutes. The Movement was started among such people as searched for freedom, justice, love and fellowship. The Church at its origins was thus a radically new community that was free, equal, all-inclusive, open to sharing and prepared for service. The Salvation History both in the OT and NT is thus a call for our involvement in history, in the movement for freedom, justice and fellowship for all people.

The Church was a radical movement of the common people, of the poor for a new form of community life. But by the fourth century it was turned into a religious institution ruled by the princely class and the higher clergy that it became an agent of oppression of the common people. Today in the emergence of the Basic Christian Communities, especially in Latin America, a new Church is being born, a Church of the people, a Church of the Poor, a Church model closer to the Jesus Movement of the New Testament. Kuncheria Pathil writes on this new movement of Basic Christian Communities. Closely related are the brief reflections of M. J. Joseph and John Augustine on the Radical Christian Activist Groups in India and their challenges to the institutional Churches. The Action Groups in India present another ecclesial model which is open, ecumenical, inter-religious, participative and committed to integral development and liberation.

Peoples Movements in India Today and the Mission of the Church

1. Peoples' movements in India

1. Background of peoples' movements

India's heritage of resistance and revolt draws its root from the years of revolts and uprisings against our colonizers. During that time, peoples' movements took the form of 'nationalist movements' seeking freedom and independence from alien rulers. India adopted a Gandhian philosophy of struggle, the peoples' movements for nationalism and independence generally took the form of passive resistance. It is significant to note the fact that the introduction of 'Communist and Marxist ideology' in India in the early part of this century was to shape the future struggles of peoples' movements. The betrayal of nationalist leaders of the freedom movement in our country coupled with the fact that local ruling classes took over the role of foreign rulers after our country gained independence, left no other option for radical groups and movements but to adhere to revolutionary theory and practice rooted in the Left tradition. The period following independence (1940s-1970s) therefore witnessed the further radicalisation of the peoples' movements. This was largely inspired by the victory of socialist revolutions in Russia, China and Vietnam in particular¹.

However, the anti-communist ideology propagated by the regime, adversely affected the growth of the Left

1. Victor Karunan, *Asian Society - An overview*, mimeographed material, 1983. p. 9

and the peoples' movements. In addition, the political changes in China and the Indo-Chinese conflicts also created much disillusionment and confusion in the ranks of the Communist parties and the activists of peoples' movements. The withdrawal of Chinese support for the CPs in neighbouring Asean countries and South Asia, the Soviet support for Vietnam's invasion in Kampouchea, further accentuated this crisis. This fact has thrown up many important questions crucial for the future of the Left traditions. The nature of the colonial mode of production, capitalism in agriculture, class analysis of society, guerrilla warfare and peasant movements, worker-peasant alliance, the role of the party, among others, are some of the salient aspects of the present debate among progressive intellectuals and activists in India².

At the same time, the Left movement has enjoyed 'legal status' in India and exists in the open, the Left itself stands greatly divided ideologically and in terms of its practice. Party-line, parliamentary elections etc., have assumed importance over revolutionary organisations and political education of peoples. Yet, the great majority of the working classes stand behind these Left parties, and they remain a force to be contended with³.

Given the above observation concerning the historical juncture of Left and radical forces in the country, the following trends emerge which perhaps sum up the nature of the political task that lies ahead.

- a) The two new faces of imperialism — multi-national companies and free trade zones — coupled with technological revolution have strengthened the hands of capitalism and imperialism in India today. Our country is becoming a prey to these new imperialist strategies.
- b) Racism, communalism and regionalism have found significant expressions in political conflicts and movements

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, p, 10

to the extent that they take the form of violent outbursts and 'white terror'. They have found patronage within the political and religious structures and institutions in our country.

c) India is also going through an intense 'religious revivalism' that is taking very right-wing and fundamentalist colourings. Religion today has become even more politicised.

d) A strong alliance is building up between the State power, the local capitalist classes and the international big businesses. Signs of increasing authoritarianism and fascism are evident.

e) The middle-classes in our society are emerging as a strong force to contend with, reaping the main benefits of 'modern society' and seeped in the values of consumerism, individualism, competition etc.

f) The crisis within the Left movements and a general disillusionment with socialist countries has offset a period of confusion and apathy among progressive forces. Trade unions, farmers' organisations, students' movements, intellectuals etc., besides finding it more and more difficult to organise and articulate their demands, are also confronted with the task of assessing the present crisis in our society and redefining their political directions, strategies etc⁴.

Briefly, the question confronting us today is: how these new efforts, trends and political processes will be articulated and consolidated to constitute a truly revolutionary force in our country? It is in this light that the different forces, efforts at the popular level, will be examined in the following pages.

2. The Indian Left parties: a critique

The year 1985 does not augur well for the Marxist parties in India. Although Communist movement is a powerful force, well based in all sectors of the working class, such as industrial workers, peasants, agricultural labour-

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11

ers, students, youth and women, and has been, and is the ruling party in a few States, it is still ideologically confused and highly fragmented. This is in sharp contrast to the Indian bourgeoisie which is growing more powerful and self-confident, and as such, remains well ahead of the working class revolutionary forces⁵.

The ruling Congress (I) party, the heir of the Indian bourgeois forces, has won the biggest ever electoral victory in the 1984 parliamentary elections and has kept its hold of the northern Hindi belt in the 1985 assembly elections. This it has done by combining the 'sympathy factor' over the assassination of Indira Gandhi, 'national integration', support of the growing force of right-wing chauvinism, the base of a relatively healthy economy, little foreign debt and a sophisticated technological infrastructure⁶.

In this socio-political juncture there seems little that the Left forces can do in the near future, in terms of providing a national political alternative meaningful to a significant section of the Indian people. Both as parties and as movements, the Left is politically strong only in pockets. Besides, the CPI and the CPI-M parties very much cling to the basic models of the Third International, namely, a democratic centralist model of the party. In their political practice they insist on providing leadership to their own workers', peasants', students', women's fronts. This had led to a plurality of mass organisations at every level, each linked to a separate party. Also, the traditional Marxist parties reject "Eurocommunism" as revisionist on the one hand, but continue their electoral participation on the other. There is an obvious reluctance to criticise the processes taking place in the "socialist" countries, and an insistence on "class" as practically the exclusive form of important social contradiction to the extent that other

5. Gail Omvedt. 'The Left in India' in *Lanka Guardian*, 1 March 1985. p. 22

6. *Ibid*

important social contradictions are left pretty much untouched. Finally, when one examines the rank and file of the leadership and cadres, one cannot deny the overall dominance by activists of petty-bourgeois origin⁷.

Strictly on the political line, the traditional marxist parties suffer from embarrassing political positions they take. While they agree in seeing Congress (I) as the main internal enemy of the working class and as the strongest agent of the repressive bourgeoisie, at the same time they support nearly all international positions of the Congress as well as some internal positions as "progressive" and "anti-imperialist". After Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Left parties spared no words in praising her as an anti-imperialist fighter, leader of the non-aligned movement, her general support for Vietnam and Afghanistan governments. With regard to internal issues, both the CPI and the CPI-M use the same rhetoric of "national integration" that the Congress (I) uses in condemning many movements based on oppressed nationalities within India. A good illustration of this fact is that while CPI-M has allied itself with regional bourgeois forces seeking more autonomy for the states within India, it has joined with the CPI and the Congress in opposing not only the Khalistan movement but also the Assam movement as "separatist", "reactionary and CIA-inspired". Even the movement of tribals in Chotanagpur tribal belt for a separate "Jharkhand" state within India has equally been opposed as splittist, without even examining the merits of the case. The on-going struggles of the dominant tribal population in Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur and the Indian army's atrocities on them are passed off in silence⁸.

While communalism has been rightly condemned and opposed by the Left parties, they have not gauged the sources of communalist forces fully yet. The fact is that communalism is nurtured not only in the Right-wing Hindu

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23

8. *Ibid.*, p. 23

forces like the RSS and in parties like the BJP, but in the Congress(I) party itself in the recent years increasingly. Hence, the Left's reference to the ruling Congress party as "authoritarian" but "secular" is a mistaken analysis of the present political reality. A result of all this has been that there is little to distinguish the Marxist parties from the ruling Congress and other bourgeois parties for the average citizen, and this certainly does not help the cause of revolutionary change⁹.

What is politically tragic is that none of these parties really make an effort to understand the new social movements emerging in the country. Although these parties are involved in organizing Dalits, tribals, women etc., through their own mass-fronts, their mechanical application of Marxism gives one the impression that the CPs alone have the monopoly of organizing any sector of the working class anywhere in the country and that any other effort at organizing the oppressed lacks a basic validity. Also, their preoccupation with 'socio-economic development' of the country seems to make them look at science, technology and industry as "neutral" elements; as such, there is not much difference between the Left parties' approach to development and that of the ruling Congress party. One crucial consequence of this is that the Left parties have not openly supported the movements and the struggles of the oppressed castes, tribals and women in the context of their assertion through environmental movements or the militant opposition to dam-building or particular women's struggles against male-domination in society. Even the historic textile-workers' strike of Bombay did not receive the active support of the major Marxist parties for the reason that the textile workers did not accept to go through their long and arduous struggle formally under the 'red flag'¹⁰.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

All this had led to an erosion of confidence on the part of politically committed individuals, groups, organisations towards the Marxist parties, particularly the two big parties, CPI and CPI-M. Still, no other political force in the country is capable of resolutely undertaking the task of revolutionary transformation of the Indian society. Certain reflections on the task that lies before not only the Marxist parties but also all forces of socialist convictions will be offered later in this article.

3. Peasants' organisations in India

Recent years have seen an increase and intensification of peasant unrest in rural India. The background of this unrest is the deepening economic crisis which affects the peasants earlier and more brutally than the urban middle class. When the news about the situation in the villages reaches the outside world, the impression that is often given is one of clashes between landlords and poor peasants and landless labourers as a result of natural and cultural factors, of communal and caste rivalries ¹¹.

However, if one makes a careful analysis of the many and fast increasing number of so-called 'atrocities against Harijans' (the untouchables of the Hindu caste society) and tribals (aboriginal tribes who usually live in the hills or in jungle areas), one cannot help but see that what is referred to as caste struggle is nothing but a ruthless class struggle in disguise; that is, although apparently sparked off by caste issues, but in reality they are economic and political issues that are fought. The landless labourers demand higher wages and land, and they have begun to organise themselves to fight for their interests. The dominant class, however, uses its political, economic and cultural power, including direct violence, to keep the rural proletariat 'in its place', as they say. In this class struggle, the ruling class very skillfully uses caste discrimination,

11. Maria Mies. 'Peasant Movements', a paper given at the Peasants Seminar, London University, January 1975 mimeographed material, p.1.

caste feelings and the feudal dependence of the untouchable labourers on the landlord as weapons ¹².

The objective reasons for this intensification of class struggle in rural India are threefold: (a) After Independence various attempts — although half-hearted ones — have been made to promote land reform by new land legislation. (b) The so-called 'Green-Revolution', — the introduction of new technology into agriculture — has opened new avenues of quick profits to the rich farmers. It has greatly enhanced their greed for fertile land, at the same time pauperising small peasants and landless labourers, due to farm mechanisation and buying up of small plots of poor peasants or eviction of sharecroppers. (c) Congress party's election promises of socialism and the end of poverty had given rise to new hopes for the rural poor. These hopes are now completely shattered. But the poor realise that the government is in league with the same class that exploits them. They are no longer fooled by slogans of socialism, as they can see that in spite of the deepening of the economic crisis, in spite of the shortage of the bare necessities of life for the people, in spite of rising prices, the rich are getting richer and richer ¹³.

It is important to note that the Peasants' organisations have made some headway particularly, although not exclusively, among the tribals. Some of the common demands made by these organisations are akin to the following:

- 1) Occupation of lands which rightfully belong to the tribals.
- 2) Building up of organised pressure on the government to implement its Employment Guarantee Scheme.
- 3) All tribal land-transfers after 1947 to be cancelled.
- 4) All debts incurred by the tribals to the government institutions to be cancelled.

12. *Ibid.*, p.4

13. *Ibid.*, p.5.

- 5) The government to fix a minimum wage for agricultural workers.
- 6) The traditional forest rights enjoyed by the tribals should not be touched ¹⁴.

Wherever Peasants' organisations have been built up cohesively, and struggles have been undertaken systematically, the peoples' movements have assumed certain strength, and have proven to the rest of society that they cannot be granted any more. This is particularly the case in certain parts of central India (Maharashtra, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh) where there is a sizeable tribal population.

The movement among the Harijans, Dalits in more recent parlance, has not been as encouraging, for the reason that they are scattered all over the country, economically lacking a basic sustenance, and therefore wherever they have succeeded in organising themselves, their activities are more geared towards acting against the prevalent problems, social discrimination and economic exploitation that exist locally. They have yet to assert their power at broader, let alone national levels.

4. Some typical popular movements

It is along these lines we witness the origin and growth of peoples movements such as Shahada Movement in Maharashtra, Chattisgarh Movement in Madhya Pradesh, Shetkari Sanghatna and Kashtakari Sanghatna again in Maharashtra, these movements initiating struggles against the existing feudal relations in these areas.

Of late some new movements are emerging and gaining strength, and these are ecology-oriented struggles directed against the environmental and human devastations caused by capitalist development. Sections of peasants and labourers have begun systematic fights for their livelihood on issues of forests, famine and fishing, not

14. *Ibid*, pp.11-12.

only confronting the state and imperialist penetration but also raising new issues of the nature of economic development itself¹⁵.

The *Chipko Movement* of the Himalayan foothills has not only helped to preserve some of the ravaged Himalayan forests and given inspiration to similar movements elsewhere, but has also articulated principles that are becoming increasingly relevant to wider movements in the country: (1) that control over forests should rest not with the State but the local community; (2) that scientists and experts, who up to now have mainly legitimized the state's decisions as "scientific forestry" while the real ecology issues have been raised by peoples' movements, should learn to serve the people; and (3) that an alternative form of development must be sought which unlike the destructive rule of the market is based on technology which allows for ecological harmony and local self-reliance.

While the original Gandhian leadership of the movement tended to be reformist and personalistic in style, in recent years a more militant youth section has emerged which is moving towards a synthesis of Gandhism and Marxism¹⁶.

Organising on similar themes, yet of a vastly different tradition, is the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha which was formed in the heavily tribal region of south Bihar in 1973. Tribals in this region, which is one of the most backward in India yet marked by oppressive enclaves of mining and modern steel plants, have been demanding a separate Jharkhand province. The reasoning is that the Jharkhand area provides steel, some heavy industry and valuable minerals for all-India use and for export, yet the factories and mines are controlled by outsiders and resources are sucked out while local lands and people remain impoverished. The JMM began to take up militant struggle against

15. Gail Omvedt, 'Indian: New Movements' in *Lanka Guardian*, 15 February, 1985, p.22

16. *Ibid.*

bureaucrats and moneylenders, and to oppose dam-building projects and other efforts to "exploit" local resources. In 1978-79 they began a tree-cutting campaign, with massive rallies and individual cutting down of teak plantations which had been brought in by a World Bank sponsored program at the expense of the 'sal' tree, centre of their economic and cultural life. Here also militant clashes with the police occurred, and brutal firings often resulted in dozens of deaths. The issue here is local human needs versus commercial needs. The "social forestry" carried on by the Indian Government and being backed by international agencies emphasizes the planting of commercial trees like teak and eucalyptus, which aside from lumber and profits for rich farmers, gives nothing to local people who are used to and demand indigenous mixed forests that provide shade and fodder and whose leaves, roots, bark, fruit and nuts may be as useful as the lumber itself. Their campaign resulted in, for the first time, a World Bank sponsored program being called to a halt¹⁷.

Another sphere of peoples' movements gaining increasing clarity is fishing industry where increased commercialization has resulted in large mechanized boats displacing traditional fishing communities and in less fish consumption by Indians as a whole, since the best fish and shrimp are increasingly going for export. Even more, while the industry has expanded since the late 1960s and is looked to as, an important source of foreign exchange, in Kerala the average catch has actually fallen every year since 1975. Local fishermen blame the trawling technique, in which huge nets are used to scrape up practically everything from the waters. The fishermen's union put forward as its central demand the banning of trawling during the monsoon spawning season, in its 50-day agitation in May-June '84 in which thousands of people picketed, held rallies, courted arrests and blocked roads and railways. The movement challenged the prevailing pattern of deve-

lopment and argued that traditional techniques, upgraded and under the local community control can actually promote better overall growth¹⁸.

The fishermen's union, like the Chipko Movement and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, all represent struggles growing from the grass-roots and raising fundamental questions about India's entire development process. They are moving towards Marxism, but a Marxism merged to local traditions, and are ready to ally with the left parties and unions although quite keen in preserving their own autonomy¹⁹.

Others, of a more specialized nature, are also making themselves felt in the socio-political arena in the country, such as the *Peoples Science Movement*. The Kerala Shastriya Sahitya Parishad, for example, won an important victory recently when it successfully forced the government to stop the building of a small dam which would have flooded the Silent Valley, a unique tropical rain forest. Others include the Science Workers' Movement in Bengal and the Patriotic Peoples' Science and Technology group in Madras, which criticise the whole model of "westernized" science and seeks indigenous sources of strength. These organisations have involved themselves in extensive rural tours using slide shows, exhibits and lectures to spread rational thinking and alternative technologies such as solar cookers and improved biogas plants; in anti-superstition campaigns through songs and street theatre; and in poster exhibits on issues such as atomic power etc. Now, as they become increasingly involved with popular movements, they are also learning from the people as well as helping them to deepen their struggles²⁰.

Whether the new movements will produce an effective new kind of liberation politics still remains to be

18. *Ibid*, p, 23.

19. *Ibid*, pp. 23-24.

20. *Ibid*.

seen. It is clear that they are vigorously anti-capitalist, conscious of the devastation caused by the market economy imposed by imperialist development. Also, their call for community control, alternative technology and a new type of development challenges the actual practice of existing post-revolutionary societies and the often bureaucratized local Communist parties²¹.

5. Popular but reactionary forces

a) Communal forces

Communal violence, now on the increase, characterised by its ethnic, caste, regional, linguistic and religious dimensions, and marked by psychological, cultural, economic, political and historical factors, is a factor that cannot be just dismissed. Communal violence fundamentally results in dominance-subordination relationships. Economic planning since Independence has led to considerable inequalities between regions and communities. The inequalities are reflected in the distribution of occupation and income, indiscrimination in employment and services and the concentration of sections of certain religious communities in agricultural labour and low-income self-employment. Particularly, in the small towns which tend to have a stagnant economy there is a concentration of craftsmen and producers of one religious community who are exploited by members of the other community who are middlemen and traders. As a result of the changing economic status of a few members of the minority community who do not depend any more on the middlemen, the traditional elites feel threatened and mobilise the masses of their own community to suppress the exploited sections that are asserting their independence.

At the present stage of social and economic development, the struggle for economic and political power are assuming greater importance than what appears to be on the surface as religious differences and inter-commu-

21. *Ibid*

nity prejudices. Within the democratic set-up, members have assumed importance and elections have become an instrument for perpetuating the communal character of our polity. In the struggle for power, the elites of the dominant and subordinate communities use religion, religious symbols, sentiments and prejudices to mobilise the masses.

The dominant-subordinate character of different religious communities changes according to their proportional distribution in the different regions. Further, to understand the complex features of communal tension and conflicts, it is necessary to study more deeply the dynamics of each local situation.

Thus, understood as a social process, communal conflicts must be situated within the context of the historical impact of colonialism, the change it brought in the feudal economic and political power structures, and the subsequent neo-colonial economy. In general, it can be said that responses to communal problems deal rather with the symptoms than with the causes. Measures are taken which create the illusion that problems are solved whilst the tensions remain strong and dormant till new incidents provoke new outbreaks and riots.

To conclude, the solution to the communal question lies not so much on the atmosphere that the government or political and religious leaders want to create for dialogue between religious communities but on secular processes geared to a just distribution of wealth, social transformation and the removal of the glaring inequalities of our society. Given the fact that each communal violence takes a toll of a few hundred lives and destruction of millions of rupees worth of property, wherever and whenever it occurs, no one who is concerned about the political process in the country can afford not to be concerned about communal violence.

b). Middle-class based Farmers' Associations

We are witnessing a recent phenomenon of middle-class farmers who are organising themselves in the form

of Farmers' Association, particularly in those parts of the country where mechanisation of agriculture has taken place in a more significant way. Mechanisation has led to greater accumulation of profit on the part of the rich farmers, but at the same time they also witness increasing number of movements among the poor peasants and landless agricultural labourers. The natural consequence is to counteract the organisational strength of the lower classes by building up their own class-power through organising themselves. This type of rich farmers' organisations have sprung up, remarkably enough in the area of cash-crops such as cotton, sugar-cane, tobacco, as well as consumption crops such as paddy and wheat. These Farmers' Associations are systematically built-up structures, since the members have both the knowledge and money to build themselves into a force to reckon with.

Understandably, the demands the Farmers' Associations put before the State Governments concern with (1) better prices for their farm-produce; (2) writing off of loans they have taken from co-operative societies and banks; (3) lowering of tariffs on electric power used for their farm-machineries; (4) lowering of prices of chemical inputs such as fertilisers, pesticides. All these add up to their economic strength.

As their economic strength grows, they assert their social and political power even more clearly. They not only dominate the lower levels of the government's administrative machinery, but also are in the process of capturing increasing number of seats in the State Assemblies. They function clearly on class-lines, but can use the existing caste sentiments of the lower classes to divide the working classes and as such to keep them in a weakened, subordinate position.

It becomes the task of the exploited, working class to build themselves into more broad-based, stronger organisations; it will be only with this added strength can they hope to fight for the rights of the working classes effectively.

II. Characteristics of the struggle

1. The Class.nature of the struggle

Even at the level of the popular masses, there is an increasing acknowledgement of the class-structure (the pattern of ownership of the means of production, the exploitation of labour, the pattern of distribution and nature of the market, and the consumption pattern of the different classes in society) and the class-functioning of the Indian society. The Trade and Labour Unions, the Peasants' organisations are bringing out the class-structure and class-exploitation of the Indian society. Surely enough, the working classes in the organised sector, much more than in the unorganised sector, have begun to base their demands on capitalist class-structure and class-relations in our society. It is this class-consciousness that is emerging on the part of the exploited classes in India which makes them acknowledge and emulate the revolutionary struggles of revolutionary classes anywhere in the world.

2. The contradictions of the capitalist economy

At the level of present industrial production in India, we are witnessing a type of industrial growth that is becoming more and more productive, requiring fewer and fewer labour. But, since there is a tremendous labour force that is either unemployed or under-employed, there is an intense competition within the working class to get the dwindling number of jobs. The industrial owning-class, on the other hand, is appropriating greater and greater surplus, thus leading to greater capital accumulation. The smaller capitalists are being edged out by the giants

Strictly at the level of production, local market is unable to sustain the feverish over production, thus inhibiting industrial expansion. This necessitates the expansion of market outside India, particularly in the neighbouring south and south-east Asia. Significantly the government's industrial policy stresses the 'export-orientation', which has also led the private industrialists to ask for technical colla-

boration of multi-national companies, and the initial 'protectionist policy' of the government has been thrown to the winds. As such, India reflects the same contradictions of the capitalist economy as elsewhere in the world.

3. Pre-revolutionary situation

The social and technical conditions for revolutionary change are gradually emerging. We are witnessing a sense of disappointment and anger on the part of the masses. One also sees the formation of revolutionary groups, more and more structured, based on shared opposition to the system. These groups are trying to work out a climate of physically meeting and communicating with each other, and trying to strengthen the ideological thrust that they share together.

On the other hand, we have an inefficient government that cannot carry out its policies, as such losing its credibility before the people. Our society is ridden with corruption from top to bottom, and the exploited classes are beginning to perceive as to how corruption is preserved in our society by the ruling classes to the latter's advantage.

Again, the members of the ruling class are beginning to denounce one another for the ills of the country. This situation is leading an increasing number of the intellectuals to rebel against the status quo, and to point out with increasing clarity the gross injustices perpetrated against the masses, and to point their accusing finger on the ruling class. These, again, are characteristics that reflect the more universal pre-revolutionary situation in other parts of the world.

III. Church's mission in this political context

First of all, the church in India should convince itself of the situation and the issues of the country in clear political terms. In other words, the church in India is called upon to be politically involved. Perhaps a small clarification as to what political involvement really means will be in place. By political involvement we do not mean party politics or government politics. Rather, we mean an

involvement in society, a society which is certainly divided in terms of classes: the owning exploitative class on the one hand and the working class on the other. The church should clearly be involved on the side of and with the exploited working classes at different levels. And that means that we recognise the dynamics and the logic that is presently operating in society on the part of the different classes and particularly the logic of the exploiting class which is geared towards more and more profit in as short a time as possible and through whatever means possible. As such, it does not really care for the good and the well-being of the working class. Also, by its money power, it can exercise political control by using the existing state power and the government machinery to its advantage. It then belongs to the exploited working-class to mobilise its primary source of strength which is numbers, to demand and get its due rights in society. The church, therefore, as part of its real concern for the plight of the working-classes should be seen by one and all that it really belongs to the exploited working-class. And this includes that it actively participates in the struggles of the exploited classes to take their due place in society.

Secondly, the way by which the church can clearly be on the side of the struggling working class will be, not in terms of the church as church doing this or that for the working class, but rather that the church becomes part of the broader political forces that are already existing and functioning at different levels and aspects of the life of the working class. Two specific forces of this nature can be pointed out: one is to join hands with the civic and democratic forces at national and local levels. These forces are understandably quite secular in nature and composition and the means and strategies that are employed. These forces and bodies take up situations and issues of the denial of civic and democratic rights wherever and whenever they occur. Although these forces may not have very clear socialist perspectives about them, it is still important to be part of the action and the on-going process set afoot by these forces. Secondly, the church should become part of

broader socialist movements in the country. Whatever be the colour of such movements as long as they stand up for a socialist ideology and strategies of action, the church should be a part. In order to do this effectively, the church in India should shed off its inbuilt inhibitions not only about politics but also about the socialist-leftist forces in society. The church must convince itself that it need not fight shy of socialists but rather work for a socialist society with all the limitations that exist on the part of socialist forces in the way they function on a day to day basis. There is no other way open for the exploited class towards redressing the serious situation of increasing impoverishment and political and social oppression. What is important is that whatever force that the church join hands with is really a secular democratic working class force, whether it assumes the shape of trade unions and labour unions in the urban industrial sectors, or peasants unions, small producers unions, the mass-fronts for women, youth, students, agricultural workers, schedule castes and tribes.

Thirdly, in order to carry conviction about its seriousness with regard to the establishment of a socialist society, the church must resist the strong temptation of becoming a middle-man between the poor on the one hand and sources of money on the other. And that means the church should stop as soon as possible its involvement in economic-development programmes with funds from abroad. Studies reveal that a lion's share of the money that is channelled through the church in India, all in the name of the poor, has gone to the already existing church's institutional structures. Such a role is no service to the poor, to say the least. It rather means an enrichment of the church in the name of and at the expense of the poor. This must stop if the church is to gain credibility from the broader democratic and socialist forces. Another temptation that the church should desist from is forming church-related action groups in the different parts of the country. Such action groups are alienated from the broader socialist forces, both in terms of their

affiliation to church's structures as well as by the foreign funds that they get from these church structures. Without doing this, the church cannot credibly become a political instrument for the cause of liberation of the working classes.

Conclusion

After having said all that we have said about the situation in the country, the forces that are at play both for and against the cause of the working classes, the possible role that the church in India can and should play is to bring about a clear difference with regard to what is happening presently.

We must end these reflections with a clear enough understanding that the institutionalised church in India is not and will not be capable of playing this political role which alone will bring about the political difference in our present reality. If the institutionalised hierarchical church will be unable to play this role, what happens then to the political task that lies ahead of all of us, as human beings, citizens and particularly as christians? I believe the situation is not that hopeless because there are, and will be, individual christians, who will not only understand the nature of the political task that lies ahead of them and to which they are called, but also will venture out to commit themselves to this political task. And this they will do by becoming part of and in relation with the broader political forces, particularly those forces that promote civic and democratic rights and evolve socialist movements in the country. They will do this, not so much because of the institutional church, but often despite the institutional church. These will be men and women who will be prepared to pay the cost, whatever it may be. Such christians will be ready also to 'disobey in the Lord', the instructions and orders that the hierarchical church may issue because they are committed seriously towards the cause of peoples' liberation in and through revolutionary peoples' movements. Shall we say then that these christians will be the real church who will carry out the command of the liberation of people given by Christ?

I.S.I., Bangalore. 46

Stan Lourdusamy

Action Groups in India and their Challenges to the Institutional Churches

The phenomenon commonly known as action groups is fairly of recent origin. What are they? How do they come about? These have to be looked into. But prior to that we have to look at some of the discussions and statements some theologians have made in recent years on this question of the Mission of the Church. The Action Groups have come about as a result of the confrontation with the existing understanding of Mission and the new challenges that were already on the scene.

I

M. M. Thomas, in a talk given in Bangalore in May 1984 on the theological aspects of the relationship between social Action Groups and Churches, discusses this question of the Mission of the Church. He says, "The idea of God in Christ is that he makes people subjects in the presence of God". Christian Mission is to make masses into peoples who can take decision and make history. "Church Mission, as we see it, is to work towards or witness to Christ in such a way that people do not become objects of charity, relief, politics or ideology but subjects of their own history."¹

J. B. Metz also takes up this central fact of christian faith, people becoming subjects of history. Metz says: "The faith of the Christian is a praxis in history and society that is to be understood as hope in solidarity in the God of Jesus as a god of the living and the dead, who calls all men to be subjects in his presence."²

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1. Dr. M. M. Thomas, Unpub. Mss
 2. J. B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, Crossroad Book, The Seaburg Press, New York, 1980, p. 73.

Christian faith according to Metz is to be lived in society with the God of Jesus who calls all men to be subjects of history. It is a faith in God who in Jesus calls all men to be subjects. God in Jesus has called everybody to be responsible to make his/her own destiny which means that God wants people to be responsible for building their own history.

Mathew Lamb in his study on a theology of social transformation which he titles "Solidarity with the Victims" says that the word of Christ on the cross was empowering transformation whereby the forces of death and evil are overcome through resurrection. Cross of Christ is an event which challenges those who believe to a life lived in dying identification with the victims of history, victims of sexism, racism, economic exploitation, militarism, environmental pollution etc. "The cries of victims are the voice of God. The scandal of the Cross is the scandal of God identified with all the victims of history in the passion of Christ."³ "Empowering transformation is an invitation, a call or imperative, to live out (praxis) God's identification with the victims of history through personal and social conversion or metanoia."⁴

Mission is this empowering transformation, enabling the victims of history to be the subjects of history.

C. S. Song in his book "Compassionate God" brings out another important dimension of Mission. He talks about the decentralization of God's power. "Cross symbolizes God's struggle against the centralization of the saving power of love in one nation and in one religion." He helps to break the communal framework of religions including Christianity.

G. Gutierrez, makes an important point on the discussion of Mission, in his book *The Power of the Poor*

3. Mathew Lamb, *Solidarity with the Victims*, Crossroad, New York 1982, p. 1.

4. *Ibid*, p. 2

in History, when he brings out the emphasis of the Gospel on "non-persons". Up till now the Christian concern was for non-believers whereas the biblical witness is to non-persons of history. Gutierrez says, "... the interlocuter of theology of liberation is the 'nonperson', the human being who is not considered human by the present social order - the exploited classes, marginalized ethnic groups, and despised cultures. Our question is how to tell the nonperson, the nonhuman, that God is love, and that this love makes us all brothers and sisters"⁵.

II

Action Groups

The Action groups were those who were challenged by this new vision. They were disillusioned by the witness of the church and so they launched on to unchartered regions.

"The Action groups by and large came into being as the result of the conscious effort of small groups of concerned people to respond to human misery, exploitation, caste atrocities and similar issues of injustice. In many cases Christian faith was the motivation behind the action.

1. The Gospel takes into account the total man and the gospel of salvation is the work of liberation of man from all bondages that dehumanize him to fuller human existence and abundant life.

2. For liberation of man, Jesus chose the way of solidarity with the weaker sections of the society in their protests and struggles for authentic humanhood.

3. For peoples' movements for liberation the gospel of Jesus is the revolutionary ferment⁶.

In their search for genuine humanism, these groups have had very creative links with people holding huma-

5. Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, Orbis Books, New York, 1983, p. 193.

6. Cirs-Wcsry Joint Programme Report, 1975

nistic ideologies. Many of these groups had in their team people who subscribed to Marxist Ideology.

The story of Action Groups is one of varying phases:

1. Involvement in action in the face of injustice, violation of human rights etc.

2. Consciousness of the 'naivette of unawareness'. The involvement in action on various issues brought them face to face with the social reality. They gradually became conscious of the need to go behind questions of poverty, exploitation, caste-atrocities etc. Understanding of the society they are part of, became a must for any type of meaningful involvement.

3. The search for an Ideology.

The groups who started with the basic concern for man later on felt the need for relating to other systems of thought concerned with the transformation of society. The following quotation from the report of the Study Conference on "People's Struggles in the Context of National History", October 17-21, 1979, Charalkunnu, Kerala, substantiates this: "The group was of the view that the action carried out in the respective areas should be based on a common ideology. The consensus was that our ideology should be of a left orientation and must stand for change in the economic structures — the main evil of our society".

4. The understanding of power.

The understanding of the state power and identifying of the forces that maintain the oppressive structures necessitated the discussion of strategy and tactics to meet the enemy, rather, enemies.

This invariably led them to the study and application of the political power. The action groups initiated a conscious study of the nature of their political identity. This is very well brought out in the statement which came out of the consultation of action groups in Raipur in February 1980.

"India has entered a new phase of more intense crisis, class contradictions and political confrontations.

"All forces committed to the goal of radical transformation of society and political super-structure will be facing more and more ferocious attacks from vested interests and their political power. In these circumstances, the forces involved in the struggle of liberation of the people have to coordinate their work and force some sort of a common front.

"Action groups that have been in existence for the last few years, have been feeling the need for a political identity and to move towards a defined political path. It is, therefore, necessary that the action groups take urgent measures (i) to discuss all aspects of the question to evolve a political identity, (ii) to set up a machinery or coordination of their work and interchange of ideas for welding the groups into more cohesive force working on a broadly common plan and (iii) to seek to establish friendly cooperation with other forces working for similar aims."

In many cases the Marxian understanding of society has been a very effective tool in analysing the society. The gradual opening up to the root causes and the understanding of the relation between the local and the national is quite a striking process.

To be an Action Group is to be ever in tension. Whether in taking up local issues or larger issues, the Action Group has to be in struggle. If there is no reason for struggle there is no room for Action Groups. But the point is that the struggle is not for the sake of Action Groups. It is always in dying that the Action Groups live. The Charalkunnu Statement in 1979 said: "In the case of Action Groups, their success is not in preserving the identity of the Action Groups, but their dying to form something new". It is only in their preparedness to be "men and women for others" that the "tradition of protest" and the "culture of resistance" can be kept up.

Charalkunnu also said: "What really matters is the willingness to die as action groups to rise again to a mature political front". This needs further probing. It need not be taken as the merging with a political party. Perhaps in the case of the Fishermen's struggle in Trivandrum demanding the banning of trawling by mechanized boats during the spawning season, what has happened is that the constituting bodies have changed their earlier image. They could go through the churning process, to emerge as a mature political front. Political front itself would need fresh definition: not the politics of establishment but of the people, the harnessing of the power of the people, their craving for freedom and authentic humanity.

Action Groups in their being with the people and getting involved in their struggle for justice have had to be critical of the established Church. The search of the action groups to discover Jesus afresh invariably led them to be in constant tension with the church. In a similar way their understanding of Marxian thinking has led them in several cases to go deeper into that system of thought and that has resulted in their being critical of the Marxist parties. This in fact is a historical role the action groups have to play in all humility. With the tension with the church on the one hand and the party on the other, the action groups are called upon to confront at deeper levels both faith and ideology thus moving into areas of action with the people, the word really becoming flesh.

III

The relation between church and action groups

The Mission is the same. But there have been difficulties in the relationship between the two. There were three types of relationship: (1) church accepting action groups as within its fold; (2) not for or against, somewhere on the border; (3) action groups as against the church, opposed to the church.

What are the reasons for this estranged relationship?

In relating to the people the church and action groups are on similar lines. In welfare activities and developmental programmes, there are no serious problems. The Mother Teresa type of charity programme and the growth-oriented developmental programmes do not raise any problems. The churches as well as some action groups are involved in them. But action groups, because of their involvement with the people and exposure to the society, have been forced to study the nature of the society, identify the forces that are against the people and take a stance against the root causes of injustice, poverty etc. Thus the Action Groups are (1) taking up the analysis of the society seriously, (2) getting involved in the struggle of the people for change of unjust and exploitative structures and (3) finding that they are more and more involved with the weaker sections of the society - women, Harijans, Girijans and the unorganised sectors. While they are conscious of the larger political forces at work, they are in their day to day activities involved in the awakening of the people to be makers of their own history, to be subjects of history and no longer at the receiving end.

The action groups are very much political in their approach, not necessarily on the party line, but involved in programmes aimed at radically changing the structures of oppression and exploitation.

But the churches are not prepared to take this line. As M. M. Thomas points out, churches have, for various reasons, always identified with the ruling powers. Because of the minority consciousness, they always want to support the existing political order.....Therefore they are quite unprepared to go into any kind of protest that involves peoples struggles⁷. It is difficult for the church to make any political action involving collective peoples struggles.

7. *Op. cit.*, Dr. M. M. Thomas, Unpub. Mss.

The church confesses its mission to stand along with the people to transform the unjust structures, the structures of discrimination and exploitation. It makes pronouncements regarding its solidarity with the poor and oppressed. But it is not prepared to live it out. The reason is obvious: it is not prepared to take the risk of losing its position. It has its own vested interests to safeguard, its own institutions.

The face of our country is marred by sexism, atrocities on harijans, tribals, suppression of the rights of the working class, violation of human rights, manifestation of the brutal force of the state. The shattered bodies of harijan girls on the rail tracks, the swollen bodies of young women in rivers and wells, the tortured bodies of workers are all familiar scenes. What is the churches' witness to this society?

As M. M. Thomas points out, the ecclesiastical framework is such that the churches cannot enter this field. They are not in a position to stand alongside of the poor. The churches can preach about churches' solidarity with people and church as a people's movement. But the churches cannot translate this into action. Metz raises the question why the ecclesiological key phrase of the Second Vatican Council - 'the people of God' has been diverted into very strange channels.

He says, "It is true that there has been a good deal of talk about the 'church for the people' especially among pastoral theologians, but there has certainly been very little about the 'church as people' or the 'church of the people'⁸. He goes on to say that the most important question is whether the 'church for the people' can become 'a church of the people'.

The fishermen's struggle in Kerala is a case in point. Not only is the church unable to take a stance alongside of the traditional fishermen against the on-

8, *Op. cit.*, J. B. Metz, p. 148

slaught of the fishing industrialists, but the established church is in league with the fishing industrialists and the state power that supports them over against the interests of the fishermen. Several examples can be listed to make this point. If we want to see people as subjects of history the church cannot stop short of dealing with the structures of the society; we have to be political.

The important question that is raised in this discussion is how the church can be true to its mission of solidarity with the victims of oppression? As it stands the churches are unable and unprepared to take this challenge. The action groups are in their own pace responding to this vision of a people who are to be subjects of history.

Action groups' vision of the church

1. The church believes in a God who liberates. The church has to find its place alongside of the God whose voice is heard in the cry of the victims. God is concerned with the 'non-persons' in the society.
2. The church is there where the work for the Kingdom is going on. The church is born where liberation of the people happens.
3. In the vision of wider ecumenism the church emerges breaking the communal barriers. The locus of evangelization is the common front of the struggles of the people for justice and participation.
4. The church is a people's movement, a movement of those who want to be healed. The church is the church of the people.
5. A spirituality based on a militant reading of the Bible sustains the church in the ongoing struggle on behalf of the victims of history. "Spirituality and political struggles are inseparable and the study of the Bible is an essential element in the development of a new spirituality, a spirituality in the struggle of the poor."⁹ Through the celebration of liturgy the church of the poor discovers and celebrates its identity.

9. Julio de Santa Ana, *Towards the Church of the poor*, Ccpd-Wcc, Geneva, 1979, p. 166.

Israel as a People's Movement for Liberation

Israel of the Patriarchal period

A journey through the first eleven chapters of the Bible lands us in a world divided into various peoples and tongues, defeated in its attempt at unity and stability. In that world mangled by divisions and the ever-mounting power of sin, there started great movements - movements of tribal chieftains with their followers bearing divine promises which held out to them hopes for a better future. It was these great movements that brought the constituents of the chosen people into the land of Palestine, the promised land. Israel's origins as well as her entire life would ever remain characterised by hopes, struggles and movements.

Obedience of faith to the forbears of Israel meant plucking themselves up from the culture and religions of Mesopotamia and setting themselves on a path towards an unknown future. The new God who called them away from the morass of polytheism was thus the founder of a religion which, in concrete, meant migration or great movement. Although the religious experience of a call from God was a strong motive power behind this movement, economic factors could not be ruled out. The first half of the second millennium B.C. gave opportunities and possibilities for unhindered movements from one end to the other of the Fertile Crescent. Seminomadic clans were wandering in search of seasonal pastures. Among them were those headed by Abram, Isaac and Jacob. From the socio-economic point of view theirs were movements in search of better fortunes.

What motive is given to these migrations by the religious historian of the Bible? God set the Patriarchs

out on the movement in order that he might bless them (Gen. 12:2-3). The promised blessing would concretise itself in the gift of the land and of a large progeny, (Gen. 13:14-17; 15:5-7; 26:6-5; 28:13-14; 35:11f). God would bless them and make them great, not merely in a spiritual sense by liberating them from pagan superstitions, but also in a really economic and social sense by giving them land and making them numerically and thus militarily strong. Freedom from endless wanderings in search of land could come only when these landless seminomads became land-owners. Freedom from fear of attack by other wandering groups or occupants of grazing grounds could be had only through a sense of self-confidence arising out of their numerical strength. God's blessing to the rootless and powerless would be authentic only when it conferred on them a land to live in and power to resist. Abraham wed to a barren wife set out with the hope and faith to become a great nation (Gen. 12:2; 17:5). The wandering Aramean (Dt. 26:5), both individual and corporate personality, incorporating Israel in her beginnings, looked forward to God's blessing in the possession of the land.

Archaeological discoveries have thrown much light on the patriarchal age. Many customs and practices of the Patriarchs accord well with the laws and ways of life of their times which have been brought to light by the archeologists. But what is unique, specific and unparalleled in the religion and faith of the Patriarchs is the motif of divine promise. This hope gave them the courage to move along precarious paths clinging solely to God's promises. Faith meant heroism and religion meant walking and working with God for better conditions of life.

On a certain occasion the promises of God are corroborated by a solemn covenant (Gen. 15:1-21; 17:1-4). This covenant was a promisory one and hence not to be considered a mere retrojection of the later Sinai Covenant which was conditional in nature. Covenant was original to the Patriarchal promises and it speaks to us forcefully

how earnest God was about this new kind of religion based on promises and how seriously he expected man to respond to him in faith and trust. In the strength of his faith Abraham hoped for the impossible - the birth of a great nation from a barren woman! The faith of the Patriarchs set the history of a great religion moving into the future, running into perils but always rising up and heading forward to greater and greater achievements in religious faith, human values and world order.

Israel's profession of faith opens out with mention of the wandering Father who moved out from beyond the Euphrates (Dt. 26:5-10; 6:20-25; Josh. 24:2-13). The migrations of these Patriarchs were not migrations of atomised individuals, but were movements of groups; for the Semitic thought does not clearly distinguish between the individual and the collectivity. An Abraham moving from Mesopotamia, wandering up and down Palestine, going down to Egypt, there running into jeopardy (Ge. 12:10-13, 1; Cf. 26:1-11), getting saved through divine intervention and coming back to Palestine stands out as the embodiment or corporate personality of the people of Israel, their origin from Mesopotamia, first settlement in Palestine, descent into Egypt, oppression there and the Exodus. Their religion was a restless movement in search of the fulfilment of the god-given promises. The promises were fulfilled to some extent in the gift of the land and the seed realised during the time of David and Solomon; but they always remained as a thrust moving ever onward in history as mankind's never-dying life.

Salvation history is written in the Bible as a Kerygma and a drama calling for our involvement. It challenges our life and demands involvement from us for the realisation of blessings in our times - blessings of land for all, food for all, love, care and justice for all! Struggle for these is religious living. Religion today, as in the days of the Patriarchs, should mean movement of the peoples of this world for a life blessed and happy, here on this god-given land of the mother earth. For, a religion which

flees into the world of gods is irrelevant to the world of humans; a religion which stands still is dead; and a religion which discounts man's mortal life is opium.

Israel of the Exodus

The life of the Patriarchs tended to be sedentary. They took possession of some land in Palestine. Isaac and Jacob seemed to have done some farming (Gen. 26:12; 37:6-7). If this process had run its full course the ancestors of Israel would have got absorbed into the settled peoples of Canaan. But the imponderables of history forced some to land in Egypt at some time in the seventeenth century when Egypt was under the rule of the Hyksos. Since the Hyksos themselves were semites, they welcomed the Hebrews. Joseph rose to an enviably high position in Egypt and his people grew numerous and strong. Under Ahmose I (c. 1570-1546) the Hyksos were driven out and foreigners were made state slaves. During the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties, namely, sixteenth to thirteenth centuries, the Pharaohs needed cheap labour for their ambitious projects. Seti I (c. 1303-1290) embarked upon the work of building up the cities of Pithom and Rameses. His son Rameses II (c. 1290-1224) completed the work. Under them the Hebrews and other foreign ethnical groups of identical social status had to undergo the oppression. Seti I was probably the Pharaoh of the oppression and Rameses II that of the Exodus.

What happened to those Hebrew groups of the Patriarchal stock who did not go down to Egypt, but stayed in Palestine? They underwent the fluctuating political situation of the land. Egypt's dominion over Syria-Palestine went through a period of weakness during the Amarna Age (1400-1350). Under Seti I and Rameses II Egypt strengthened its hold on Palestine, but could not overthrow the Hittites with whom Rameses II had to make a treaty. At the time of the conquest (1250 - 1200) the petty kings of Palestine were disunited and weakened by mutual fights. Like their brethren in Egypt and later on in the wilderness, these peasants of Palestine too were longing

for liberation — liberation from an oppressive system of government. But it was the struggles, escape, wanderings and God-experience of the group from Egypt that became normative and basic to the creed of the Old Testament.

Escape or deliverance from Egypt, known as the Exodus, is as central to the Old Testament faith as the Christ-event to that of the New Testament. This decisive and faith-founding event is preached and proclaimed by the Bible as a gift and accomplishment of Yahweh. The genius of Moses, the towering personality of the entire Old Testament, had an important role to play in it. If the movement of the Patriarchs from Mesopotamia to Palestine was peaceful, although precarious, the Exodus from Egypt involved violent breaks and swift flight. In the place of the seminomadic Patriarchs with their followers, we see here Moses, a leader of extraordinary faith, endurance and physical as well as moral stamina, leading a flimsy recalcitrant people whom he would never abandon. In the place of El, the God of the Patriarchs, the creator God of providence, love, mercy etc., we see in Exodus Yahweh, the warrior God displaying military valour, pouring out wrath, smiting the rebellious, arousing nature to frightful changes and leading the people to their goal with outstretched arms and mighty deeds! A new God-concept, a new God-man relationship and a new type of peoplehood arose out of this tremendous movement from Egypt through the wilderness to Palestine. Life and growth are embedded in struggles and movements in the religious history of Israel.

Although theologically Yahweh, the God of the Exodus and El, the God of the Patriarchs were one and the same God, from the historical point of view, Yahwism began only with Moses. The origins of Yahwism and the way it reached the man Moses are questions that do not concern the theme of this article. The name Yahweh is powerfully eloquent on the nature of God's will and His involvement in human history. The meaning of the word 'Yahweh', 'I

am who am'', speaks more of God's function than of his nature. God is immensely personal, active and present in the struggles of man. In fact, it was through the turmoils and upheavals of history that God revealed himself and his will to Israel. Man's struggles for freedom, fight for better conditions of life and his movements in the geographical, economic and moral spheres always bring him a deeper understanding of God. The God of Moses tells him that his name and nature will be revealed to him and to the people through what He is. Yahweh is not a God who can be brought to serve and help the rich and the powerful, but a God who orders and executes in a powerful way the passage of slaves from slavery to freedom. His nature is to be on the side of the helpless, his powers are employed in the cause of deliverance and his existence is always man-oriented. Moses, Israel and we for that matter, need not and should not seek a God-understanding which has no relevance and meaning for man's life, its hopes, challenges, aspirations and battles!

In the confessions, songs and celebrations of Israel's faith, Yahweh is first and foremost the God of deliverance, God of the Exodus (Dt. 26:5-9; 6:20-24; Josh. 24:2-13; Ex. 15; Ps. 77:14-21; 78; 105; 106; 114; 135; 136). The Patriarchal promises are just dutifully mentioned, but the core event of Israel's historical faith is always the Exodus. Israel knew God first as their liberator and only after the exile there arose the faith in Yahweh as a creator God. The promises to the Patriarchs did in fact find some fulfilment when their flocks and followers increased and they succeeded in occupying some land in Palestine. But salvation history, written with focus on the Exodus, viewed this fulfilment of the promises during the life-time itself of the Patriarchs as partial and provisorial. God's definitive and decisive entry into salvation history in full earnestness and purposefulness began with the Exodus and the phase dealing with the Patriarchal history is relegated to the background as preparatory, subordinate to Exodus, when Israel's history gets its real take off. Thus, a great move-

ment, violent and breath-taking, was the founding God-experience for Israel's religion and faith!

The story of the Exodus speaks of the prodigious signs and wonders worked by God. All these can be understood as natural phenomena quite usual in those days and places. God is not a whimsical power that twists, arrests or violates the laws of nature. He, being the Lord of the universe, is capable of harnessing its powers for the success and welfare of the people. For struggling humanity, faith in God should not mean passive expectation of miracles from above, but active exploitation of the potentialities of nature through science, technology etc. Divine initiative and all-casualty should not mean inertia on the part of man. Exodus was the work of God. With equal emphasis one should say it was the work also of Moses! The plagues of Egypt and the crossing of the Reed Sea were miracles, not because God made nature act against and beyond its laws and powers, but because man's efforts and nature's seasonal and occasional changes met and collaborated in a happy and fruitful way under the providence of God. God is great, not in that He does everything for man, but in that He makes and helps weak humans aspire, strive after and achieve results beyond their usually estimated capacity. Faith in an all-powerful helper-God should urge man to transcend his limitations and littleness by helping himself out of the seemingly impossible into the liberating self-assertion of his abilities which bear the stamp of the Infinite whose life-breath was breathed into him at creation!

The power of the human in the event of the Exodus is exemplified with all its excellence and ambivalence in the call and mission of Moses. As a timid man he ran away from Egypt. With all his timidity and for all his hesitance, he was caught and brought by God to play his supreme role in liberating a people and founding a religion. The world should not wait for and count on only heroes and geniuses. The powerless of the world can be redeemed through powerless individuals who have indo-

mitable faith in God and unswerving dedication to fellow-men. The legends, stories and narratives about Moses encrust a person whose weakness becomes all the more impressive when seen against his achievement as a leader. The recalcitrance of the people and the insistence of divine commands ground him out into a man of heroic endurance. He clung to a God who bullied him and to a people who exasperated him. Every religious person who has committed himself to God is in duty bound to take upon himself the cause of the oppressed. Faith lived out in a world of inequalities has to manifest itself in unstinted self-immolation on the altar of service where God is mute and people are rebellious !

Israel in the wilderness

The power of Yahweh and the heroic leadership of Moses set in dramatic motion the beginnings of a religion, unique in the history of mankind. If the nature of Yahweh as liberator-God was revealed to Israel in the flight from Egypt and in the miracle at the Reed Sea, still further experiences of movements and happenings in the desert were needed to bring Israel to an understanding of themselves as a people. A mixed rabble escaped from Egypt (Ex. 12:38). They were destined to become a community and their experiences would become normative for all Israel's faith. The growth from a crowd to a community was to mature through many tests. The euphoria of the crossing of the Reed Sea gave way to feelings of discontent. Freedom in the desert did not appear as a worthwhile exchange for the slavery in Egypt. Lack of food and water made their precarious existence all the more depressing. The journey through the wilderness was a time of murmuring, internal strife, rebellion against Moses and lack of faith. The wars in the desert might have been many. Attacks from enemies are occasions for a group to set aside internal wranglings and to get mobilised into a well-knit fighting unit. The victory over the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16) boosted their sagging spirits. Yahweh, the liberator God of Israel's Exodus, would gradually become

the warrior God of her holy war traditions. The drudgery of the wanderings had its hard as well as relieving moments. Adversities plagued them; but a way out was brought them by providence.

People needed a respite to reflect and an experience to enlighten them on the purpose, meaning and goal of the events that brought them together. In the oasis of Sinai God gave them to understand that His design for them was a covenant community. Sinai is always associated with the covenant which would ever remain as the basis and framework for Israel's historical existence. It was there that Israel realised the real and ultimate purpose of God in liberating her from Egypt. The goal of Exodus, in God's mind, was the covenant (Ex. 19:3-6). Yahweh would make them His chosen people, His special possession. This would not confer on them any privilege or honour, but would oblige them to live as a covenant-community, obeying God's laws and practising justice and righteousness in social life.

This covenant is the basis for Israel's peoplehood. It makes her faith unique in the mosaics of world religions, ancient and modern. Not physical blood relationship (Lk. 3:38), but the real and spiritual experience of God's liberating and saving acts and communion with Him and fellow humans in covenantal bond is what makes the multitude of believers into the unity of a people. But people had to be helped in living out their peoplehood. The guidelines for the same were furnished by the Law. Law thus defined and instructed Israel how they were to behave towards their God and towards one another. It was God's law that strengthened and organised Israel's covenantal peoplehood by supplying it with the framework of an ideal society. In order to foster and promote righteous social living, Israel enacted new laws at various times in the course of her checkered history. All these laws were attributed to the God of Sinai because laws and covenant were the heart and crown of the Sinai encounter.

The movement from Egypt reached a spiritual high-point at Sinai. From now on they had to move forward,

not as a crowd, but as a community. But the maturing of Israel's community-existence needed further tests, struggles, tribulations, joys and sorrows. Life in the wilderness lasted "fourty years", namely, a long time approximately the life-span of one generation. Desert was symbolic of hard life. Hardships of life and strifes within the community continued throughout the years in the wilderness. The greater part of their wilderness sojourn was spent in the desert oasis of Kadesh-Barnea. In spite of God's providence and Israel's covenant allegiance to Him, people continued to grumble and rebel against Moses. They got tired of manna and nostalgically thought of the variety rich food they had in Egypt: the fish, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic (Num. 11:4-6). Revolt against Moses' leadership was instigated by his own brother and sister (Num. 12). Korah, Dathan and Abiram too were vigorously active arousing the people against Moses (Num. 16). The tensions and rivalries brought the covenant bond almost to the point of breaking. As God pulled them together into a community, forces and factors, such as envy, jealousy, lust for power, hunger, thirst and above all, lack of faith tried to splinter them apart. Looking back on these years, the inspired historians of Israel's sacred history perceived how it was necessary for the people to get forged into greater unity and faith through much sufferings and many struggles (Dt. 8:2-3).

The appetite of the famished and land-hungry people got whetted as they got news about the fertile land of Canaan, "flowing with milk and honey" (Num. 13). But the adventurous attack under the leadership of Joshua and Caleb was repulsed by the Amalekites of Negeb and the Canaanites of the hill country (Num. 14). The humiliated community was compelled to make a detour through Transjordan. They suffered another humiliation when their humble request for transit permission was not granted by the king of Edom, a kindred nation of theirs (Num. 20: 14-21). As they approached the territory of the Amorite

kingdom of Sihon, Moses again requested permission to pass through their territory. The king not only refused, but sent his army to destroy Israel (Num. 21:33-35). Israel was compelled to fight and God gave them victory. After taking possession of the land of the defeated Amorites, they thrust themselves forward, defeated the king of Bashan and took possession also of his kingdom (Dt. 3: 1-11). They pitched their camp in Transjordan, across the Jordan near Jericho. Thus, landless fugitives tasted the exhilarating experience of what it means to possess land. Obedience of faith began to be understood and exercised as readiness to fight the battles of Yahweh; for, by now, it was amply revealed to them that Yahweh was a warrior God and His will was to bring Israel to the promised land. The militancy of faith was enkindled and Israel was ready to make a violent and bloody entry into Canaan. The violent break off from Egypt would close itself with a violent entry into another land!

Israel of the conquest

Palestine at the time of the conquest was nominally under Egypt. But Rameses II was too busy with his building projects at home to attend to its politics. As mentioned above, the peasants languishing under the feudal system of the many and mutually quarrelling petty kings of the land were up in revolt for liberation. The group that attacked from the east must have comprised the tribes of Joseph and Benjamin. The tribe of Judah must have entered from the south. Many other marauding groups which entered from the north later made common cause with Israel. The group under Joshua made a violent initial thrust and occupied the hill country. Shechem and the Gibeonite cities were in the possession of those Hebrew tribes who did not go down to Egypt and thus did not have to be conquered by Joshua. The covenant at Shechem (Josh. 24) tells us that various tribes came together and accepted Yahwism and joined the covenant community of Israel. Thus Israel of the tribal league comprised the exodus group, those groups who joined them during the

desert period, those who infiltrated into Palestine independently of the Joshua group and those who never went down to Egypt but had always been living in Palestine since the Patriarchal times. The motive and inspiration for all the tribes to rally around Yahweh was certainly the military appeal of Yahwism. The God in whose name the groups under Joshua achieved stupendous military victory was the God who responded to the longings, anxieties and aspirations of the tribes. They believed that Yahweh was the God of the weak, powerfully coming to the help of the powerless.

The conquest of Palestine was the miracle of peasants asserting and obtaining their dignity and freedom. Slaves got land, peasants became free in their own land and hard-pressed groups condemned to the fringes of society got a rightful place for their existence. This was a violent turn in the geographical and moral movement of Israel's salvation history. Egypt's weakness, disunity among the kings of Canaan, lack of a dynamic faith in the religions of Canaan, the militant nature of Yahwism and many other factors coalesced in the providence of God to bring about Israel's conquest of Palestine. Over-emphasis given to the event of Exodus pushes the event of the conquest into the shade. But an Exodus without conquest would have meant God's cruelty in making slaves jump from the frying pan of Egyptian slavery into the fire of insecurity in the wilderness! Conquest is unpalatable to many a scrupulous mind because it speaks of blood-shed, massacre and annihilation perpetrated in the name of God! But Israel's conquest differed from the crusades of the Middle Ages, the European conquest of America accompanied by butchery of the aboriginals, or the invasion of Asia and Africa by the so called Christian Europe for military hegemony and economic looting. Israel's conquest did not mean the rich gaining dominion over the poor and the weak, but the disenfranchised gaining their fundamental rights and minimum requirements for a type of existence worthy of human beings. A faith that fights shy of militancy in the face of a dehumanising world order or political and economic structures is a sham. A religion that

opposes the overthrow of systems, structures and dogmas that breed or perpetuate the discrimination of the masses and the criminal privileged status and position of the minority is the curse of the world. A god who is alien to human struggles is a non-god and as such is immediately to be done away with for the glory of the true God and for the salvation of the world !

Israel of the Tribal Confederacy

With the conquest of Palestine nomadic Israel became a sedentary people. But the movement of life did not and could not come to a halt. The history of Israel now opened itself on to the chapter of the rule of the Judges, covering the twelfth and eleventh centuries. During this period the life of the tribes had to strain and struggle under conflicts with forces both within and without. First there was the struggle for physical survival. Once the invading tribes had gained space in which to settle, the elan and organisation of their attack were dissipated. Unconquered Canaanites attacked them from time to time. The Israelites were now compelled to fight defensive battles. Individual tribes and groups of tribes were often subjugated by other peoples of Palestine. The military heroes who delivered them from enemies were the Judges. Their service to the people did not consist in passing legal verdicts, but in delivering the afflicted. In the Bible the verb 'to judge' does not convey the idea of establishing dry, faceless, legal justice, but denotes a justice that rescues the afflicted (Ps. 43:1; Is. 1:17). The battles of Israel at this time, like those of the conquest, were battles of Yahweh, and every tribe and person who believed in Yahweh had to join the army in times of crisis. These battles were many and they continued till the time of David who brought the whole of Syria-Palestine under Israelite dominion.

In addition to threats to her physical survival, Israel was exposed to a subtler and more dangerous threat during the period of the Judges. The simple and highly ethical religion of Yahwism is now confronted with the highly attractive and enticing religions of Canaan. The

greatest temptation for Israel came from Fertility Cult. Yahweh the warrior God was good and sufficient in the days of their wanderings and in times of wars. But now they have become farmers and they were strongly tempted to go after Baal, the god of fertility worshipped by the Canaanites, whose better harvests were believed to be the gift of this god. Sacred prostitution, wine-drinking, raisin cakes and many other items, practices and celebrations of this cult allured Israel in an irresistible manner. The Israelites were beginners in agriculture and needed an agricultural fertility god to catch up with the Canaanites experienced in farming and blessed with richer crops. Naturally religious syncretism crept in. Yahweh began to be worshipped along with Baal and Yahwism's liturgy got "enriched" with Canaanite rites and rituals. What saved Yahwism from total dissolution into Canaanite religions was the frequent wars. In times of war the Israelites turned to Yahweh, the warrior God; but in times of peace they went after the Baals. No defeat at the hands of the enemies could bring Israel's religion back to its pristine purity. Israel's faith got institutionalized in cult and this evil would never depart from her religion!

There were troubles in another sphere of Israel's life, namely, in the structure and style of their organized life. Israel at this time was a confederation of tribes. Devotion to Yahweh held the tribes together; but it obliged them only to fight their holy wars and to assemble at the central sanctuary for celebrations which were not frequent. For the rest, each tribe was independent. Scattered as they were all over Palestine amidst Canaanite enclavements, the autonomy enjoyed by the individual tribes made them selfish. It became more and more difficult to get the tribes to concerted action or to hold them together in unity. The Song of Debora (Judg. 5) reprimands the tribes of Reuben, Gad Dan and Asher because they did not join in the battle against the Canaanites. The fact that the Moabites could cross Jordan and exact tributes from Benjamin (Judg. 3:12-30) shows that there was no stable union of the tribes to oppose them. Ephraim's claim to

preeminence (Judg. 8:1-3; 12:1-6) proves that inter tribal rivalries too plagued them. As years passed by, it became more and more evident that the loose organisation of the Tribal Confederacy could not take them any further. All the neighbouring peoples of Israel were organized into monarchies. Temptation to get organized "like the nations" became stronger and stronger. Abimelech's attempt to establish a dynastic rule (Judg. 9) proved abortive, but it set an ominous precedent. Israel's faith in the exclusive lordship of Yahweh branded human kingship as anathema (Judg. 8:23; I Sam. 8:7). The parable of Jotham (Judg. 9: 7-21) and Samuel's description of the ways of the king (I Sam. 8:11-18) clearly show how monarchy was looked upon as treason and suicide. With all its draw-backs, it was the organisation of the Tribal Confederacy that spared Israel from political despotism and threw the people back on Yahweh in times of crises. Again, it was struggles that kept Israel's religion alive and vivified it from time to time!

But the inevitable did happen. By the end of the eleventh century, the Philistines started an all-out offensive to wipe out Israel once and for all. Against the professional army of these Philistines, wielding the superior weapons of the iron age, Israel's tribal recruits were helpless. The fall of Shiloh and the capture of the Ark by the Philistines (I Sam. 4) sounded the death-knell of the Tribal Confederacy. People urged Samuel to give them a king who would lead them to battle and bring them to victory. Bible preserves two strands of traditions regarding the institution of the monarchy, one pro-monarchical (I Sam. 9:1-10; 16; 11), the other anti-monarchical (I Sam. 7:3-8, 22; 11:17-27; 12). This reveals to us that monarchy was never an undisputed institution in Israel. The movement or leap from Tribal Confederacy to Monarchy saw Israel's fall as a people and birth as a nation!

Israel under the Monarchy

The Yahwist, a theologian from the south, saw the definitive fulfilment of the Patriarchal promises in the achievements of David. Under David Israel became a

miniature empire extending from Mesopotamia to Egypt. The progeny of the Patriarchs did indeed become numerous and the promised land in all its breadth, width and wealth was in their possession. The pagan city of Jerusalem was conquered by the personal army of David and so became "the city of David". David's choice of Jerusalem as the capital of the nation was a move of great political astuteness. Neither the tribes of the south, nor those in the north, could accuse him of partiality in this matter, because it was his city and did not belong to any tribe. Under Solomon Jerusalem became magnificent with its imposing palace, temple and fortifications. Solomon's diplomatic relations brought rich dividends to Israel. His sea-port at Ezion-geber, the fleet of ships he acquired and manned with the help of Phoenicians, the far-flung connections in commerce he made with all the then known nations and peoples of the world, his trade in horses, the chariots he built, the many fortresses and cities he constructed within his kingdom, his lavish patronage of art, wisdom and culture and a host of other achievements and accomplishments of his made Israel the envy of the nations!

But monarchy had its many sins and burdens too, which far outweighed the blessings it brought to the nation. In the religious field, monarchy manoeuvred many departures from the ideals and concepts of pristine Yahwism. By bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem in a solemn procession, David showed himself to be a pious and fervent king committed to the cause of religion. But his move converted Yahweh into a city-god! Later on Solomon would make Him a temple-god as well. The edifice of the temple, the altar, the sacrificial system etc. were imports from paganism. Worship became sacral. Yahweh was converted into a deity! The nearness of Yahweh to his people, so evident and felt in Israel's nomadic past, was snuffed out by the grotesque facade of the new cult. Enthroned in the holy of holies and made inaccessible to the people, Yahweh became a clerical god to be worshipped and placated by priests trained in complex ceremonies with elaborate rubrics meticulously to be observed!

The construction of the temple, palace, many fortifications, cities etc. were glorious accomplishments, but at the cost of the life and liberty of the exploited people employed in large numbers in these building projects. The nation was divided into twelve administrative districts for taxation, military conscription and forced labour. Israel ceased to be the members of God's family and got the humiliating status of being the subjects of a human king. They had to show allegiance, no more to their respective tribes, but to the nation and to its king! The courtiers and officers formed the aristocracy, through money-lending and lucrative business they robbed the peasants of their property and freedom, reducing them to slaves. Tax-collectors fleeced the people and the judges in the courts set up by the king sold justice to the highest bidders. Oppression of the poor became the order of the day and there was no one to voice the silent agony of the masses. In Egypt they were slaves to foreigners; but now their taskmasters and oppressors were of their own flesh, blood and faith! Yahweh, the God of Exodus, was aroused once again to fight; but this time, against his own people! He struck the nation with rebellion from within, attacks from without and above all aggressive religious campaign through the prophets. If it was a prophet, Nathan, who helped Solomon to the throne (I Kg. 1), another prophet Ahijah by name instigated Jeroboam to rebellion against Solomon (I Kg. 11: 29-39). In the northern kingdom of Israel Elijah fiercely fought against Baalism and social injustice (I Kg. 17-19; 21). His disciple and successor Elisha fomented the rebellion of Hazael in Damascus (II Kg. 8:7-15) and of Jehu in Israel (II Kg. 9:1-3). Micaiah, the son of Imlah, was another bold announcer of God's judgement against the nation (II Kg. 22). From the eighth century onwards classical prophets waged relentless battles against oppressive administration, godless foreign policy and syncretistic cult. Of all the classical prophets, Hosea was the harshest denouncer of kingship and kings (Hosea 8: 4; 13: 11). But for these valiant prophets, the religion of Israel would have disappeared from history. Isaiah during the Assyrian period and Jeremiah during the Babylonian period were

fully involved in the politics of their nation. Although they failed in holding back the kings from their course of suicidal foreign policy, the religious contributions of these prophets were indeed invaluable to all posterity. Prophets had their eyes intent on reading the writings on the walls of contemporary politics. They interpreted the events of history and exhorted the nation to steer clear of pitfalls. Every turn in history was full of forebodings and portents for the prophets. The rise and decline of world powers, the plans and plots of neighbouring nations, the attitudes and aversions of the bosses at home, the anguish and aspirations of people at large, were all media and mirrors for the prophets to see and read aloud God's designs on Israel. While prophets conveyed the message of events, God directed the march of history.

From exile to Jesus

Israel lost everything, but Yahweh did not abandon her. In the unclean land of Babylon God guided her through the exilic prophets. Ezechiel and the author of the Lamentations of Jeremiah helped Israel to understand the meaning and message from the trauma of Jerusalem's fall. Yahweh churned history for the sake of his people. Salvation history moved on. In 539 Babylon was supplanted by Persia. In 538 life once again sprouted for God's people in their promised land as the first group of exiles arrived there. They came back with great hopes, but disillusionment met them at home. Sufferings and humiliations both moral and social became their companions. Under the tutelage of Persian benevolence Israel pulled along. The second temple was built, religion and society were reformed through the mission of Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophets of the post-exilic period answered the queries of their fatigued faith with varying degrees of propriety and success.

As political history limped forward from the Persian period through the years of Greek domination into the clutches of Rome, the religion of Israel and its structures underwent changes that conglomerated into the Judaism of Jesus' days. Pride, arrogance and narrow-minded

sectarianism determined post-exilic Israel's self-understanding and attitude towards others. Social evils plagued the community. As years passed by, authority and power came into the hands of the priests. Soon Israel was under hierocracy with the high priest wielding absolute power under the suzerainty of the Seleucids. Since the office of the high priest was a highly coveted one, wicked aspirants began to buy it with money. Some of the ugliest chapters of Israel's history belong to this period. Priests, burning with lust for power resorted to shameless and criminal ways to raise money for buying up the office of the high priest. Religious laxity and indifference on the part of priests and people induced the bosses to add rigour to beliefs and practices. Legalism killed the soul of religious living. Laws and regulations rendered religion mechanical. Factions arose pursuing different goals. Study of the Law, rigorous monastic life, political opportunism, high-brow clericalism etc. became their labels. Liberation through political leaders or religious authorities proved to be a mirage.

Thus Israel, God's people on earth, was always a people on the march. From Abraham to Moses, from Moses to David, from David to the Exile, from the Exile through the second temple to the times of Jesus, it was an onward movement, bearing a rich heritage and a heavy burden of promises, blessings, betrayals, resistance, violence, virtues, humiliations, glory, despair, hope etc.! The bankruptcy of the Old Testament salvation history, its failure in freeing man from the bonds of sin, was the negative preparation for the advent of Jesus, the Saviour. Jesus-event divides world history into two eras, B.C. and A.D.! Jesus Christ ushered in the Kingdom of God and bequeathed it to his followers as a mission and a task to be fulfilled by them. The world is witness - and God too - to the sad and tragic denouement of church history as a parallel and a repetition of Old Testament history. The Kingdom of God is replaced by the kingdom of the church.

Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community as the Archetype of the Church

If there is one thing that critical exegesis has made clear it is that we can no longer hold that the Church was founded immediately by Jesus in its present institutional and highly structured form. It does not emerge fully armed from the pierced side of Jesus, like Athena from the head of Zeus! One might indeed speak of the dynamic foundation of the Church, in the sense that the structures which the Church gradually assumed in the course of its long and troubled history were continuous with or at least implicit in the intentions of Jesus¹. This is a valid view but it belongs, I suggest, to the confessional rather than to the critical history of the Church². It is a faith-understanding, not the fruit of critical investigation. For critical investigation shows up a great variety of church orders adopted by the different local churches of early Christianity, so that its picture of the development of the Church is very different from the smooth and orderly progression from Peter and the Twelve, through the supervisors (*episkopoi*) and elders (*presbyteroi*) of the Pastoral letters, to the monarchical bishop of Ignatius of Antioch, with which the confessional history of the church has familiarized us³.

It would, I believe, be very difficult to trace back any of these early church orders to Jesus himself. For

1. Aeldred Cody, "The Foundation of the Church: Biblical Criticism for Ecumenical Discussion", *Theological Studies* 34 (1973) 3-18.

2. I have borrowed this distinction from Gerhard von Rad *Old Testament Theology*, Volume I (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd 1962) 107-108. Von Rad uses it for the Old Testament (the history of Israel). It applies equally to the New (the history of Jesus and for the Church).

3. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press 1977) 103-23; Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (London: Chapman 1984) 19-30

Jesus seems to have founded a wholly unstructured community of disciples (without any differentiation of rank or ministry), in which he alone was Master and Lord (Mt 23: 8-10). It is this community which is the starting point of the movement which later, as part of the inevitable routinization of charisma to which every such movement is necessarily subject, emerges as the Church. Whatever, then, be the external structures that the Church adopts in the course of its history (and these, we have seen, have varied considerably even in the relatively short span covered by the New Testament), its spirit must be that of the Jesus community (the community of Jesus and his disciples) from which it originates. Origins are normative. We remain true to what we are, only by remaining true to our beginnings, when we become what we are. It is important, then, that we remain faithful to the spirit of the Jesus community, explicitly presented to us in the New Testament, and conspicuously in Matthew, as a paradigm for the Church⁴.

What was the Jesus community like? To understand it we shall have to look at both the *sociological milieu* in which it emerged, as well as at the *religious experience* of Jesus himself, which brought it into being. Both must be examined if the community of Jesus is to be properly understood. To insist on either one to the exclusion of the other would be misleading. "Sociological explanation", as Theissen notes, "can only apply to typical features and not to individual instances"⁵. They can explain why certain forms of religious movements come into being at a particular time and place, but not the specific shape of any one of them. Why, for instance, should such different forms of religious reaction as the monastic withdrawal of the Qumran sectarians, the armed resistance of the Zealot guerilla bands, the religious revivalism of the Pharisees,

4. Cf. James P. Martin, "The Church in Matthew", in James Luther Mays (ed.), *Interpreting the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1981) 97-114, sp, 107-109

5. Gerd Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus [The Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity]* (London: SCM 1978) 97.

or the radical prophetic and charismatic movement of Jesus and his followers, have arisen in the same social setting, involving largely the same social classes?

But it would equally be naive to imagine that a religious movement can be explained merely in terms of the religious inspiration of its founder — as if religious life were lived out in a vacuum, isolated from other areas of experience. New Testament exegesis, which so far has shown little interest in the sociological background of the texts it studies (their proper *Sitz-im-Leben*), has now begun to be more sociologically aware, though it has yet to find a way of integrating sociological analysis into its exegesis⁶.

Both sociological and religious structures thus play a part in the origins and the development of the Jesus movement. As to which of these is prior seems to me a question as academic as the one about the hen or the egg. The fact is that both sets of factors interact dialectically (each influencing and being influenced by the other), and both must be kept in mind when the Jesus community is discussed.

In attempting to understand the community of Jesus, whose 'spirit' must animate our own, I shall therefore (A) begin with a description of the *sociological milieu* in which the community emerged, relating it as closely as I can to our situation in India, which in many ways is analogous to the situation of Palestine in the time of Jesus. I shall then (B) go on to discuss the *religious experience* of Jesus, which responding to this situation, gave rise to the Jesus community, with its specific features which are so significant for us today. My essay, then, is an attempt at history not (directly at least) at theology. I am not trying to spell out a New Testament ecclesiology, but merely attempting to understand the shape of the community of the historical Jesus. This attempt is, I believe, important. For even if we locate the foundation of the Church in the

6. Cf. George Soares-Prabhu, "The Historical Critical Method", in M. Amaladoss (ed.), *Theologizing in India* (Bangalore: TPI 1981) 335-40.

disciples, post-Easter experience of the Spirit, this post-Easter Church is not discontinuous with the community of Jesus. It is related to it, I suggest, as a tree is related to the seed from which it grows. For the risen Lord is, after all, not different from the earthly Jesus; and the spirit he communicates for the foundation of the church is ultimately the Spirit of Jesus. There is a normativeness about the Jesus community, which the church today (or at any time) ignores at its peril.

A. Sociological Milieu

Sociologically, the Jesus movement can be described as one of several responses to a deep-seated, pluriform crisis that was troubling Jewish society of its time⁷. This crisis, which affected all the areas of Jewish life (economic, political, cultural and religious), was basically a crisis of colonialism. Five centuries of political domination, first by the Persians, then by the Greeks, and lastly by the Romans, had left deep scars in Jewish history, and led up to the profound crisis at the turn of our era, which among other things occasioned the Jesus movement. The crisis had several dimensions. We shall focus on three: the economic, the cultural and the religious.

1. Economic Crisis

Economic exploitation is an inevitable feature of colonial rule, for no country occupies another for altruistic motives. Roman imperialism certainly imposed a heavy burden on Palestine at the time of Jesus — even though its economic exploitation was never anything quite as savage as that of the British in India, cold-bloodedly destroying a flourishing textile industry to make room for their Lancashire cottons⁸; or of the Western powers in China, forcing Bibles and opium (a combination that would have delighted Karl Marx) down the throats of a helpless

7. Theissen (n. 4 above) 97.

8. Romesh Dutt, *The Economic History of India*, Volumes I-II (Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India 1960), sp. I, xxv-xxvi.

and deeply humiliated people⁹; or of the United States in Latin America impoverishing a rich continent by unleashing on it its big business backed up by its 'big stick'¹⁰.

The Romans exacted a tribute of six million denarii (about 50 million rupees) each year from Judea alone — apart from numerous toll fees and custom duties farmed out to unscrupulous tax collectors, whose rapacity and greed were proverbial¹¹. Add this to the immense burden of heavy religious taxes (tithes of the harvest, the first fruits of the flock, stole fees for various rituals and sacrifices, and an annual temple tax), which supported a huge, economically unproductive priestly class (some twenty thousand priests served in the temple at the time of Jesus,¹² and maintained an enormously costly temple liturgy, and one begins to understand the intolerable burden which lay on the people. So heavy a burden inevitably destroyed the economy of rural Palestine. Increasing rural indebtedness brought on by the heavy civil and religious taxation led to the selling off of the small land holdings which had been the normal pattern of agricultural ownership in Greek and early Roman Palestine, to large and often absentee landlords (Mk 12:1). These while enjoying the urban amenities of cities like Jerusalem or Tiberius, ran their estates on hired labour through the

9. Cf. Elizabeth Peier, who in her review of Thomson, Stanley and Perry, "Colonial Imperialism: The American Experience in East Asia" in *Newsweek* 14/3/1981, 52, notes: "From the first contact in 1784, American traders deplored China's 'lack of dynamism', missionaries 'moral failure'. And both scrambled unblushingly for its business. On one expedition, the Rev. Dr. Gutzlaff headed out Bibles from one side of a merchant ship, as from the other the crew unloaded contraband opium."

10. Cf. Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London Hodder & Stoughton 1972) 129-26; Andre Gunder Frank *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1971) 309-46.

11. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM 1962), 129-26; Frederick C. Grant, *The Economic Background of the Gospels* (London: Oxford UP 1926) 87-110.

12. Jeremias (n. 11 above) 205-206.

intermediary of stewards (Lk 16:1-8). As a result there appeared a growing proletariat of dispossessed small farmers now become landless day-labourers (Mt 20:1-16), who, when conditions took a turn for the worse, might take to banditry (Lk 10:30), join one of the revolutionary bands in the 'hill country' engaged in guerilla warfare against Rome (Mk 15:7) or flock to the cities to eke out a precarious living by begging. From the large crowds of the beggars, the sick, the crippled, the lame, and the 'possessed' that meet us in the gospels it is clear that the poor made up a large part of the population of Palestine at the time of Jesus, and that it was from among these poor sections of society that the Jesus movement drew its main support¹³.

Cultural Crisis

Jewish society at the time of Jesus was also a culturally beleaguered society. Cultural imperialism (the attempt of the dominant power to impose its world-view and its values on subject peoples) joined to racism (the assumption by the colonizers of their innate superiority over the colonized) are the inevitable concomitants of colonialism. They lead to a deep culture shock and to a profound psychological trauma among the colonized peoples: less visible perhaps but more damaging than the economic devastation that colonialism causes. "The arrival of the white man in Madagascar", writes Franz Fanon, "shattered not only its horizons but its psychological mechanisms"¹⁴. Colonialism creates a 'colonized consciousness'. When "millions of men... have been skilfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement"¹⁵, then the colonized begin to see themselves and their world with the eyes of the colonizers. They interiorize the colonizers' contempt for the 'native', his customs, his culture. They make their own

13. George Soares-Prabhu "Class in the Bible: The Biblical Poor a Social Class", ? to appear in *Vidyajyoti*, August, 1985

14. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press 1967) 97.

15. Aime Cesaire, quoted in Fanon (n. 14 above) 7.

his estimation of their worth. The psychological trauma that this produces goes hand in hand with a profound cultural insecurity. The 'native' feels culturally threatened and may react either by an unconditional surrender to the culture of the colonizer, or by aggressive resistance to it, often in the form of a wholesale rejection, joined to an uncritical idealization of his own past¹⁶.

Such cultural imperialism and the racism that legitimizes and feeds on it is familiar to us from our experience of Western colonialism in Asia, Africa and Latin America, which has been racist and imperialist to an unprecedented degree¹⁷. But they were part too of the Hellenization of Palestine at the time of Jesus. When one reads that Aristotle (that *anima naturaliter Christiana* so admired of Western theologians) could advise "the young Alexander to treat the Greeks as a leader would his men, and the barbarians as a master would his slaves", that is, as "objects for exploitation¹⁸", for slaves in Aristotle's view were 'implements' to be used¹⁸ (can one imagine the Buddha saying this?) — then one begins to realize the tensions that must have been generated in Palestine at the time of Jesus, when such Greek / barbarian racism (watered down, no doubt, but by no means eliminated by the decline of Hellenistic power in the last two centuries preceding the Christian era) encountered the equally intransigent Jew / Gentile racism of Israel, based on its consciousness of being 'the chosen people'.

16. A good example of this is the attitude of the celebrated Hindi novelist, Premchand to Western culture - cf. Geeta Pandey, "Premchand and the West", *New Quest* 48 (1984) 34754.

17. Cf. C. R. Boxer on the Church's attitude to race relations in his *The Church Militant and Iberian Expansion, 1440-1770* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Up 1978) 138. This effectively explodes the myth of Latin racial tolerance, for it concludes: "There were exceptions in all times and in all places. But both Iberian empires remained essentially a 'pigmentocracy'... based on the conviction of white racial, moral, and intellectual superiority - just as did their Dutch, English and French successors" (p. 38).

18. Aristotle, *Politica* I, 5 (1254 a), quoted in Martin Hengel, *Jews, Greeks and Barbarians* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1980) 56.

Racial tensions which are psychological, translate sociologically into cultural tensions. Two wholly different cultures, the dualistic (matter / spirit), abstract, conceptual, contemplative culture of the Greeks and the holistic, concrete, symbolic, strongly action-oriented culture of the Jews, collided in the Palestine of Jesus' time ¹⁹, engendering the typical reactions of the 'colonized mind', which ranged from an unconditional surrender to the conqueror's way of life, to an outright and passionate rejection of it — from Herodianism to Zealotism in Arnold Toynbee's celebrated classification ²⁰. A clash of cultures analogous to the conflict between tradition and modernity which we are experiencing in India today, was thus a conspicuous feature of the world of Jesus.

3. Religious Crisis

Cultural tensions find expression in religious conflict for religions are closely tied up with, if indeed they are not the animating force of cultural systems. The religion of the colonizer threatens to overwhelm that of the colonized, particularly if, like Christianity or Islam, it is an aggressive, missionary religion, making use of its position of political privilege to encourage proselytism. But, as Aloysius Pieris has pointed out, the major world religions (those with metacosmic soteriologies) are largely immune to such attack ²¹. Neither Hinduism nor Buddhism has been seriously affected by the colonial Christian onslaught. Loss

19. Thorlief Boman, *Das hebraeische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechischen* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1952). I am not convinced by Hengel's attempt to demonstrate that the Judaism of the Roman period was Hellenistic both in Palestine and in the diaspora. - Cf. his *Judaism and Hellenism*, Volumes I-II (Philadelphia: Fortress 1974). The work depends on the study of literary texts which always reflect the mentality of a small literate minority. It shows little awareness of the dynamics of the encounter of cultures which anyone who has lived in India will be familiar with.

20. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Volumes VIII (London: Oxford UP 1954) 580-629.

21. Aloysius Pieris, "Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation", *Vidyajyoti* 43 (1979) 261-84.

of membership to the colonizer's religion has been minimal: astonishingly so, given the highly privileged political and economic position that Christianity enjoyed.

Impact on Hinduism as a religion has been somewhat more pronounced, but not really significant. Hinduism's traumatic encounter with Christianity has led to syncretistic movements like the Brahmo Samaj, which soon died out or to more successful modernizing attempts at renewal: like the Ramakrishna Mission, which borrowed some external forms from the language and the usages of Christianity (the Ramakrishna mission, the gospel of Ramakrishna), without capitulating to the Christian vision. Jesus was given an honoured place among the religious figures of Hinduism, in sharp contrast to the systematic 'demonizing' of Hindu deities by aggressive Christian missionaries. The Sermon on the Mount undoubtedly influenced Mahatma Gandhi, though it would be inaccurate to describe Gandhism (as I once did) as a synthesis of the "philosophy of the Upanishads with the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount"²². For the non-violent ethics of Gandhi derives not from the New Testament, but from the long Hindu-Jain tradition in which he grew up and whose best expression he found in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Values like liberty, equality, fraternity, social justice and human rights (ultimately gospel values which fit uneasily with the Hindu understanding of the human person as part of a hierarchical order [caste] and as bound by duties [*dharma*] rather than endowed with rights) have continued to leaven Indian society powerfully. But they derive not so much from the preaching of the Christian churches (which have generally ignored such issues when they have not opposed them), but from the spread of secular ideologies like the liberalism of John Stuart Mill (whose influence on the Indian intelligentsia has been prodigious) or the socialism of Karl Marx.

To all this Hinduism has reacted with remarkable vitality. It has begun to throw off the monstrous social

22. George Soares, "Mahatma Gandhi", in J. Neuner and R. de Smet (eds) *Religious Hinduism* (Allahabad: St Paul 1964) 294.

evils which had developed during its dark ages under foreign rule (*sati*, the more blatant forms of untouchability and child marriage); has refashioned Vedanta into one of the great philosophical systems of our times; continues to produce a succession of gurus and god-men who attest to its abiding spiritual vitality; and still caters to the popular religiosity of the masses of India while providing a meaning system for those whom secularism has alienated from popular religious rituals and beliefs. It has given rise too to militant revivalist movements which, unfortunately, have been infected by the narrow-minded aggressiveness of their opponents, just at a time when these have begun to learn tolerance from Hinduism! If Hinduism still remains a source of much repressive socialization and still legitimizes social injustice on an immense scale²³, it has within itself the resources for its own healing. In spite of the defensive mentality of revivalist groups, it is no longer a threatened religion. Indeed it is doubtful if it ever really was so.

The Judaism of Jesus' time, a coherent, highly structured religion providing ethnic identity to a close-knit, fiercely nationalist group, would obviously have been even more resistant to outside religious pressure than Hinduism has been. Syncretist Jewish sects infected by Hellenism, the precursors of later Jewish gnosticism, no doubt existed, but only as insignificant marginal groups²⁴. All the main currents of Jewish religion were concerned rather with the preservation of their Jewish identity, and "wanted the Torah to be observed more consistently than before"²⁵. If the Zealots insisted strongly on the *religious prescriptions* of the Torah, and particularly on its first commandment which demands exclusive loyalty to the rule of God and so the rejection of all foreign rule, the Qumran sectarians and the Pharisees insisted on the obser-

23. Arun Shourie, *Hinduism: Essence and Consequence* (Sahibabad: Vikas 1979).

24. Marcel Simon, *Les sectes juives au temps de Jesus* (Paris: Presses Universitaires 1960) 81-93.

25. Theissen (n. 5 above) 97.

vance of both its *religious* and its *social* prescriptions. But whereas the minute observance of the social prescriptions of the law obliged the sectarians to withdraw into the wilderness where alone, free from the contamination of the gentiles, such meticulous observance was possible; a highly developed casuistry allowed the Pharisees to interpret the Law in ways that made its rigorous observance possible in everyday situations. The rigorism of such groups, however, tended to accentuate rather than to resolve the religious crisis. For it created elitist groups of observants who rejected as outsiders all those who failed to live up to their own rigorous standards of conduct. The Zealots turned against all collaborators with foreign rule; the Pharisees despised the '*am hā'āreš* (the people of the land), that is 'the rabble unlearned in the Law'; the Qumran sectarians lumped together as 'children of darkness' all those who had not been predestined by God to join their privileged community of salvation.

If the Jesus movement succeeded in avoiding such disruptive elitism it is because it was not so much rigorous as radical. It insisted not on an exact observance of the detailed prescriptions of the Law (religious or social) but on a radical obedience to its spirit. The Law was understood to be a juridical formulation of the exigencies of love, that is, of that active concern (reflecting the concern of God himself) which reaches out to every human being in need (Lk 10:25-37). As Paul would say, "the whole Law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' " (Gal 5:14).

The radicalism of Jesus thus invites us to an inter-human concern that sets no limits but reaches out to the undeserving and the unrewarding (Lk 6:32-34) — to the collaborators with the Romans (the 'tax collectors') so hated by the Zealots; the '*am hā'āreš* ('sinners', little ones') despised by the Pharisees; the 'children of darkness' (the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel') written off by the sectarians of Qumran. The good news is truly for the 'poor' — for the destitute, the outcast, the sick, the crippled, the illiterate, the exploited, the oppressed (Lk 4:16-21).

The physician is for the sick (Mk 2:17). The shepherd goes after the one sheep that is lost (Lk 15:1-7). All occasion for elitist self-righteousness is thus ruthlessly eliminated, because when the Law is interpreted as a demand for an absolute and unconditional love which reflects the unconditional love of the Father (Lk 6:35-35), then no one can claim to have truly kept the Law, to be without sin (Jn 8:7), or to have the right to judge or to condemn (Mt 7:1-5).

B. Religious Response

The success of the Jesus movement in responding to the religious crisis of its time was due therefore to its radicalism. The movement was radical because it originated in the new and radically liberative religious experience of Jesus. Jesus experienced God as *abba* and communicated this experience to his followers (Mt 11:27). In their culturally colonized society, which sought security by 'putting a fence around the Law', such an experience of God as unconditional love would have been shattering. It would have led to an authentic 'conversion' — the dislocation of familiar patterns of perception and behaviour and a shift to a radically new way of experiencing reality and responding to it. Such a conversion would inevitably mean the emergence of a new community with its own world view and values, and with its own distinctive lifestyle in which these are expressed²⁶. The Jesus community which emerged from and embodied the *abba* experience of Jesus (and so became archetypal for all the Christian communities that would follow) was characterized, I suggest, by the following salient features, which must remain normative for every Christian community, no matter what the concrete structures it may at any time adopt. It was a community that was free, all-inclusive, open to sharing, prepared for service, and radically equal.

26. When Dunn (n. 3 above) 106, advises us "to refrain from speaking of the community of Jesus or the community round Jesus", he is obviously thinking of a structured community.

1. A Community of Radical Freedom

The experience of God's unconditional love frees the followers of Jesus from both internal compulsions towards greed and ambition, and from the external constraints of a servile bondage to ritual and to law. For the experience of God's caring and provident love liberates them from anxiety about their daily sustenance (Mt 6:25-34), and from the need of affirming themselves by accumulating possessions or exercising power. They no longer 'serve' (are the slaves of) Mammon (Mt 6:24). The followers of Jesus express this radical inner freedom through their radical renunciation of possessions (Mk 1:18; 10:28-30; Mt 10:9-10), of home (Mt 8:20), and of family (Mk 1:20; 3:31-35; Lk 14:26), thus showing themselves "radically detached from all the norms and traditions of the rural village society" of their time, where, as in all rural societies, property and family ties were particularly strong²⁷.

Again the experience of God's forgiving and accepting love (Lk 15:1-31) frees them from guilt and from the need of straining after merit through the meticulous observance of innumerable ritual and moral laws. They cease to be 'slaves' of the Law (Gal 4:21-31). Instead their ethos is so strongly centred on the human person, experienced not just as the image of God but as his child (and so as brother/sister) that both law and cult are radically subordinated to human need. Love (ultimately the interhuman concern through which one expresses one's love for God) is "the basis of the law and the prophes" (Mt 22:40), and is "superior to all burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mk 12:33).

Such a relativization of the Law and of cult is extraordinarily radical. That "the sabbath is made for man not man for the sabbath" (Mk 2:27), is one of the guiding principles of the Jesus community, whereby every institution is subordinated to human need. Equally radical and sweeping is the community's flat rejection of all the laws

27. Pheme Perkins, *Ministries in the Pauline Churches* (New York) Paulist 1982) 14.

of ritual cleanliness (even those in the Old Testament) on the ground that good and evil are not determined by extrinsic factors (persons, places or things) but by the intentions of the heart alone: "There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him... For from within, out of the heart, come evil thoughts" (Mk 7:15-23). With this, the separation of sacred and profane areas in the world, traditional to most religions, is wiped out at a stroke. "Nothing is unclean in itself", as Paul rightly understands Jesus to have said (Rom 14:14). No places are of themselves holy — for God is not to be worshipped in Jerusalem or in Gerizim but in "spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:21-23). No person is more sacred than another, for all are children of the one Father in heaven (Mt 23:8-9). The followers of Jesus are to be distinguished by the quality of their love, not by their possession of different degrees of sacral power.

So the early church which grows out of the community of Jesus as a tree grows out of its seed, has no special places of worship (no temple, no synagogue, no church); no special cult objects to give physical expression to the deity (no *murti*, no ark of the covenant, no tabernacle); no special liturgical language (worship and instruction are in the common language of the people — Aramaic in Palestine, popular Hellenistic Greek in the Hellenistic world); no sacral priesthood (for the ministers of the community are never called sacred persons [*hierēis*] in the New Testament, where Jesus alone is the one mediator and the one priest)²⁸. If such typical "religious" elements have crept into the later church as part of its "inculturation" into the Hellenistic world, may it not be because the followers of Jesus have not always found it easy to live up to the radicalism of their Master?

28. Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop* (London: Chapman 1971) 13. I believe that this terminological limitation is more significant than Brown allows.

2. A Community of Radical Universalism

The radical freedom of the followers of Jesus from their multiple alienation is a freedom for *universal* commitment. The experience of God as *abba* implies experiencing all human beings as brothers and sisters, and so rules out all discrimination on any ground whatsoever. Jesus himself violates the caste distinctions of his people by 'communing' with tax collectors and sinners (Lk 15:1-2) and by numbering an outcast customs official (Levi the tax collector of Mk 2:13) and an outlaw rebel against Roman rule (Simon the Zealot of Lk 6:15) among his closest followers. He makes women his disciples (Lk 8:1-2; 10:38-42), commends the faith of gentiles (Mt 8:10; Mk 5:34), and proposes a Samaritan as the model for the interhuman concern which for him is the essence of the Law (Lk 10:29-37). Such all inclusiveness is pointedly formulated by Paul when he writes to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

The Jesus community thus transcends all distinctions of race and culture (Jew/Greek), of caste and class, (slave/free) or of gender and sex (male/female). Its unifying and identifying principle is being "in Christ Jesus", and this alone. No caste, race or sex distinction can be made the specifying feature of the group. The community thus becomes radically 'catholic'. It is (potentially) catholic not just *extensively*, by geographical extension (as the British Empire was 'catholic'), but *intensively* through its readiness and its ability to root itself in a variety of cultures (the way that Buddhism has been authentically inculturated in so many cultures of Asia today). Because it belongs to no single culture the Jesus community is at home in all. All cultural imperialism thus radically excluded in it. The Church of Jesus can never be an empire however 'holy' or 'Roman'. It is essentially a communion of local churches, each with a cultural identity of its own.

3. A Community of Radical Sharing

Such all inclusiveness inevitably leads to tensions in the Jesus community between the diverse groups that constitute it and notably to the pervasive tension between the rich and the poor. Paul alludes to this when talking about the Eucharist at Corinth. Sharp class differences intervene even at this celebration of so basic a rite of christian identity and oneness. "For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the assembly of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (1 Cor 11:21-22).

The response of the Jesus community to such tensions is radical 'sharing'. This is to be understood not merely as doing works of social relief such as almsgiving (Mt 6:2-4), the care of widows (Act 6:1-4), or Paul's collection for the poor churches of Palestine (Rom 15:26-27; 1 Cor 16:1-3; 2 Cor 8:1-15) — though these were conspicuous ways in which sharing was actualized in the early Church. More basically, sharing means the assumption of responsibility by each member of the community for the welfare of all — an attitude which today might need far more radical forms of expression than were feasible in the infant Church.

A pattern of radical sharing is already evident in the life of Jesus and his disciples, who lived as 'wandering charismatics', that is, as itinerant preachers with healing powers, depending for their sustenance on the support of sympathizers and friends. The pattern continued into the early Palestinian church (*Didache* XI, 3-6). Elsewhere too, the early Church experimented with other forms of sharing like the 'love-communism' of the first Jerusalem community, which has been described for us in Acts (2: 44-47; 4:32-37). If the language of Acts here echoes the stock description of ideal communities that we find in Jewish and in Greek literature²⁹, this does not mean tha

29. Cf. George Soares-Prabhu, "The New Testament and the Economic Liberation of Man", *Jeevadhara* 32 (1976) 198-210.

its picture of the first Jerusalem community is wholly fictitious. Rather it is probably (as so much in Luke-Acts) a 'typical' description of many such attempts at living out the love-commandment of Jesus that must have been made by the early Christian communities. For as Troeltsch has rightly pointed out: "The command to love one another at least is bound to influence a small and intimate community on the economic side as well, which will lead it to make an attempt to realize this idea in practical life, that is, so long as external hindrances do not oppose it and make it impossible." ³⁰

4. A Community of Radical Service

Because the experience of God's unconditional love frees the followers of Jesus from their bondage to mammon (greed, consumerism, 'the concupiscence of the eyes'), they are able to form a community of radical sharing. Because it frees them from the craving for power (ambition, the need to dominate, 'the pride of life'), they can form a community of service. In imitation of Jesus, who came "not to be served but to serve" (Mk 10:45), the Jesus community is essentially a community that serves. That is why to make oneself the 'servant' (*diakonos*) or the 'slave' (*doulos*) of all is perhaps the most urgent demand that Jesus makes of his followers (Mk 9:35; 10:43; Mt 23:11); and why 'serving at table' (*diakonia*) is a standard description of Christian ministry in the New Testament (Acts 1:17; 12:25; 21:19; Rom 11:3; 1 Cor 5:18; 2 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 1:12).

Such a disposition for service will therefore define not only the attitude of the Church as a whole (so that its mission will always be understood as a service to the world and not as an expedition to conquer it); but also the attitude of individuals within the Church. There is no

30. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Volume I (London: Allen & Unwin 1931) 62.

room in a Christian community for any desire for domination or for any ambition for power. "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to lay down his life as a ransom for many." (Mk 10:42-45) The only 'hierarchy' that Jesus will permit is thus a hierarchy of service — not a hierarchy of power.

5. A Community of Radical Equality

Indeed so adamant is Jesus against the corrupting influence of power (for power does indeed corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely, as Lord Acton has pointedly put it), that he forbids even the assumption of titles that suggest the exercise of power. "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ." (Mt 23:8-10)

The community of Jesus is thus a radically egalitarian community. If all (Jew/gentile, slave/free, male/female) are truly "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28), they are all basically equal before the Lord. Differences of race, class and sex do not affect their basic relationship with Jesus nor their basic worth as human beings who are children of the one Father in heaven. The Jesus community, then, will not tolerate any form of stratification (racist or caste) which touches the intrinsic worth of a person. Differences of status within the community will be differences of function, not of being. For if all are indeed (to use Paul's great metaphor) members of one body, then claims to superiority become meaningless — for no part of a body is 'superior' to another and each is dependant on and at the service of the whole. "For by one Spirit we were

all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor 12:13)

Conclusion

Of all the Jewish movements which arose in response to the multiple crisis (economic, cultural and religious) which afflicted Jewish society at the turn of our era, the Jesus movement was the one which weathered the crisis most successfully. It was able to do this because it provided a new and creative response to a critical situation. Its response was basically religious, deriving from a profound and genuine religious experience. The liberative experience of God as *abba* called into being a radically free community, which could respond to the economic plight of the poor by 'sharing'; face cultural threat by abandoning defensive encystment for cultural pluralism; overcome the 'will to power' through an unlimited readiness to serve; and confront the towering inequalities of a racist, sexist and slavish society by affirming the radical equality of all human beings. The movement was thus extraordinarily radical. Two thousand years after its emergence we still have to 'realize' the radical vision of the Jesus community.

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Basic Christian Communities: A new Ecclesial Model

The emergence of *Basic Christian Communities* (BCCs) in the Churches of Latin America today is a significant phenomenon, full of hope to the Church universal. BCC is a new ecclesial model, challenging the present day institutional and hierarchical one, while remaining, on the one hand, closer to the New Testament and, on the other, becoming more relevant to the contemporary South American situation characterized by poverty, ignorance, domination and oppression. This new ecclesial model is welcome also to other Churches and countries, especially in the so-called Third World where the socio-economic and political situation is similar to that of South America. What are BCCs? their origin and their historical, ecclesial and political background? Are the BCCs a threat to the institutional Church or a sign of hope?

New Christian life-style

The best way of introducing BCCs is by reporting upon their Christian life-style, which is quite similar to that of the early Christians. "An old mine-worker put in the hands of the youngest minor his salary for the day...this is so that you can eat today. I am old; life is more simple for me. You are young, you have to help build a better society, you have to be strong and well-nourished."¹ "Some communities in Guatamala were celebrating a mass of solidarity with the people and the Church of Nicaragua scarved by the destruction of war. During the offertory, each one placed on the altar his offering to be sent to this suffering Church. A poor man placed on the altar a small plastic bag containing just a handful of beans, nothing else. He was already returning

1. Jose Marins and Team, *Basic Ecclesial Community: Church From the roots*. Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, p. 62

to his place when he stopped. He... went in. He took off his jacket, folded it carefully, affectionately and let it on the altar together with the other offerings...the temperature that evening was 55°F."² Yes, in the BCCs they share everything with one another.

In Santiago, Chile, someone arrived from abroad to visit a priest friend who lived in St. Peter's Parish on the outskirts of the city. After much searching he went in a small bar that was open and asked. "Could you please tell me where is St. Peter's Church?" Answer: "The Church of St. Peter meets today in the home of the Lopez family."³ For BCCs the Church means not a building, but a living Christian community in action and worship. Another instance: "...two families have a quarrel. The people hear of it. A few days later the priest arrives for a customary visit. Someone gives him the schedule for his visit in which the celebration of the Eucharist was included, but goes on to explain that perhaps there would not be a mass. When the priest showed displeasure, the same person said, 'there has been a quarrel and we are going to decide whether we can celebrate mass'. During the meeting of the Church leaders which followed, it was decided that it was impossible to celebrate mass until peace was restored. And that is exactly what happened."⁴ They believe that a divided community cannot celebrate together the Eucharist worthily.

A typical Sunday celebration of a BCC could be described as follows: "...this is a multipurpose hall in Sao Miguel, a suburb of that sprawling city (Sao Paulo, Brasil), of over twelve million people. Gathered here for their Sunday celebration are some sixty people: men, women and children. The fifteen young people standing at the two heads of the table are clearly in charge... They face the people who are seated in a semi-circle. One of

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.* p. 15

4. Libanio J. B. "A Community with a New Image", *WCC Exchange*, No.2. (May 1979), p. 25

them, a woman, is the leader of this morning's celebration, a sort of first among equals. The people stand as she reads the gospel... The reading is followed by a play, enacted by the young people. They seem to be asking questions on the gospel passage... answering it through enacted testimonies. The people join in... Individual members pray, but not for personal needs. They pray for the women's cooperative, for trade unions... and for similar concerns which are common to the community. Now the young people go in solemn procession to the small room where the blessed sacrament is preserved... They return to the table... More prayers. Then the kiss of peace, during which there is much movement in the hall..... It is a moment of joyful acceptance of one another, a true celebration of community... People go up to the table. It is time for communion. There are songs, quite a number of them. They are mostly their own... The leader gives the blessing... The chairs are rearranged to form a full circle, and discussion starts on the work of the week and the issues of the community... There is no doubt that the service is well planned. But it is also spontaneous. They don't call it a service, their word is *celebration*. They celebrate Christ and community, affirming their faith and rejoicing in their togetherness in Christ." ⁵ This new Christian life-style witnesses to the birth of a new Church, a people's Church.

Origin and growth of BCCs

Ever since the discovery of the 'New World' in the 15th century colonies of the Portuguese and the Spaniards began to occupy the South American continent, pushing the natives to the interior. Gradually most of the natives and the African people who were brought as slaves accepted the religion of their new masters, but 'a superficial Christianity'. The socio-economic and political system was feudalistic, colonialistic, capitalistic and imperialistic, and the situation today is not much different. Thus the South American people have a history of 500 years of oppres-

5. Thomas T. K., "How Basic Communities are Changing Latin America", *One World*, No. 97, July 1984, p. 17

sion and domination. They were treated like animals. "Mud is the symbol of our lives", says an angry worker, "we live in mud, we are treated like mud."⁶ The cry of the oppressed and exploited people at last reached the ears of the Church authorities who began to side with the exploited masses. Was it a conversion on the part of the Church authorities as demanded by Jesus and his gospel, or a strategy at the wake of the Marxist and Communist success in organizing the masses against an oppressive system? Perhaps both.

South American Christians were 'sheep without shepherd'. The chronic shortage of priests left the Church in a miserable state. The Christian communities began to lose their identity for lack of religious instructions and sacramental celebrations. To face this danger in 1956 Bishop Aguelo Rossi of Barva do Pirai (Brasil) started a movement for the evangelization and renewal of this vast diocese. It is reported that everything began with a complaint from an old woman to her bishop during his pastoral visitation. "In Natal", she said, "the three Protestant Churches are lit up and crowded. We hear their hymn-singing... and our Catholic Church remains closed, in darkness... because we don't get a priest."⁷ Should the Church be closed and everything in the Church stopped in the absence of priests or ordained ministers? The bishop and the whole Latin American Church were challenged by this question raised by the old woman and thousands of other ordinary men and women. The South American Churches decided to go ahead with training lay leaders as catechists and co-ordinators who would gather the Christian community in smaller groups leading them to prayer, worship and reflection, centred in the Word of God. It was a movement for the evangelization and renewal of the whole South American Church, and it proved to be a great success. Through various movements like "Better World", "Catholic Action", "Christian Family Movement" and

6. *Time*, May 7, 1979 "The Church of the Poor", p. 56

7. Jose Marins, "Church Basic Communities", *WCC Exchange*, No. 2, 1979, p.4.

"Legion of Mary" the laity was integrated into the real life of the Church and Basic Communities were formed consisting of, say 15-20 families in a neighbourhood. In their community gatherings they discovered the power of the Word of God, the strength, joy and peace it gave to them in the midst of their sufferings and problems.

Side by side with this movement of evangelization and renewal of Christian life, a "movement of Basic Education" was also started, sponsored by the Churches. The movement was meant to conscientize the people of their situation of poverty, oppression and exploitation and of its root causes. The movement started radio schools and educational centres where they used the pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire and others "consciousness-raising and non-directive group-dynamics". Through them groups of poor and illiterate people got together; they learned to read and write and formed communities, smaller than parishes. As the members of these communities were all Catholics, they functioned practically as basic ecclesial communities.

Thus the formation of BCCs was the result of gradual process and development. In the first stage the communities were only concerned with strengthening their ecclesial and sacramental life. They were mainly prayer groups, gathered around the reading and listening of the Word of God. Gradually, these communities turned their attention to certain social tasks, like helping the poor and the needy, planning and executing common projects of education, public health etc. They realized that their Christian faith and their social commitment were inseparably linked. Finally, they reached a third stage in the formation of these communities when they assumed a political task and orientation. They realized that social reforms are not possible without political change. BCCs thus became the hotbed of political ferment in South America.

Today there are as many as 150,000 BCCs in South America, spread all over the continent, in Brazil, Honduras, Chile, Panama, Tenador, Bolivia, Colombia, Nicaragua, San Salvador, Dominican Republic and Paraguay. They

are changing the face of South America, its religion, society and politics. They are not parallel Churches or dissident Churches but are fully supported and backed by the whole Latin American Hierarchy. The Latin American Bishops' Conferences (Medellin 1968 and Puebla 1979) spoke about them as the "initial cell of the ecclesial structure"⁸, "clusters for evangelization"⁹, "principal factors in human development and promotion"¹⁰, "an important starting point in the building of a new society"¹¹, and as "the expression of the Church's preferential love for the simple people"¹². They endorsed the formation of the BCCs as the important pastoral option and called for their promotion and multiplication.

Characteristics of BCCs

BCCs play both social and political roles. But they are not groups in the Church for social and political activities. Nor are they discussion groups or prayer groups or confraternities in the Church. The BCC is Church itself, the basic unit of the Church, the initial cell of the ecclesial structure. The parish and the diocese are a fellowship or communion of BCCs. It is formed of men and women, young and old, including children. It is the basic unit of the people of God in a particular place. They have an intense experience of the reality of the Church as the family of God, as the people of God. It is a *basic* community, not in the sense that it is the base of the ecclesial pyramid. Basic means the fundamental ecclesial element, the basic ecclesial reality, where the salvific event or the paschal mystery of Christ takes place in a concrete and visible form. It is there the reality of the Church is given visible expression to as the leaven, salt, light and conscience of the World. It is the Church at the grass-root level, the Church consisting of the poor, oppressed, marginalised and simple people. The community is *Christian* or ecclesial

8. Document of Medellin 15. 10

9. *Ibid*, 15

10. Document of Puebla, No. 96

11. *Ibid*, No. 642

12. *Ibid*

because they are held together by their christian convictions, by their christian faith, by their absolute commitment to Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The BCC is a *community*, which means it is not a mere *group* which is transitory, specialized and homogeneous, but a permanent, constant and stable interpersonal relationship, where persons and families of a pluralistic and heterogeneous nature are brought together into an affective as well as effective fellowship in order to give a global response to the totality of life and not simply to face a particular problem or issue¹³.

The BCC is a *Church of the People*, in contrast to the Church of the Pope, Bishops and clergy. In BCCs, a *people* is created from among the masses, a people who are free, creative and responsible. In BCCs they experience their togetherness, their being the Church, their being a people. They discover their collective identity, their past, their heritage, culture, language and traditions. Theologically speaking, BCCs are communities of faith, hope and love, animated by Christ and His Gospel of love, freedom and fraternity, and are called to anticipate as well as prepare the Kingdom of God, God's eschatological people¹⁴.

BCCs exist practically only among the poor and the exploited ; it is a *Church of the Poor*. Afterall, the Church at its origins was a community of the poor. The Gospel was preached to the poor. Jesus came to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to set the downtrodden free (Lk 4:18). It was to the poor and simple people God revealed the mysteries of the Kingdom (Mt 11:25). The apostles and the disciples of Jesus were mostly poor fishermen who belonged to the oppressed classes. But with the conversion of emperor Constantine in the fourth century Christianity became the Roman State Religion and a Church of the princely

13. Jose Marins and Team, o. c., p. 20.

14. Leonardo Boff, "Theological Characteristics of a Grassroots Church" in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, edited by Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, New York: Orbis Books, 1981, p. 134

class, a Church of the rich and the powerful emerged. Thus Church became part of an oppressive system and lost its liberative force. Today once again in BCCs the Church is becoming a community of the poor and a force of liberation. It is in the struggles of the poor against oppression, exploitation and injustice, in their struggles for freedom, equality and justice that God is present, that He reveals Himself, as He did in those days of Moses and of Israel. The BCC is the sacramental presence of God's liberative action today. It is a *Church fully committed to integral development and liberation*. It not only proclaims the integral liberation in the coming of the Kingdom of God but also witnesses to its arrival by her *lifestyle of mutual sharing* among the members of the BCC and among the different BCCs. In BCCs "the hope of the poor is celebrated and bread is shared, the bread that so many lack and in which the life of the Risen One is present and acknowledged"¹⁵.

The Word of God as enshrined in the Bible is the central point of reference in BCCs. They are *communities gathered around the Word of God*. Through them the poor, simple and uneducated people have discovered the dynamic force of the Word of God and the power of Jesus Crucified and Risen. In their community meetings they read the Bible prayerfully and listen to the living Word of God addressed to them in their own concrete situations. What happens there is a deepening and educating in their faith and a transformation or renewal of their life that they become an *evangelizing community*. The Word of God becomes a deeper and interior motive force for their action in the world. Besides a reflection-action-reflection programme centred on the Word of God in the day-to-day life-context, there is also in BCCs a celebration of the Word of God in daily life-context. BCC is a *celebrating community*. They celebrate their life-together, their success, failures, struggles, the birth of a

15. *Final Document International Eccumenical Congress of Theology* February 20-March 2, 1980, Sao, Paulo, Brazil no. 43.

child, the death of a brother or sister and so on, listening to God's Word in and through these concrete situations and events, and responding to it in spontaneous prayers, praise, thanksgiving, petitions, and acts of penitence.

By tuning themselves to the Word of God and by analysing and discerning the reality, BCCs discover the will of God in concrete situations. BCC is thus a *prophetic community*. As a consequence they will have to face oppositions and persecutions from the part of the sinful world. But prophetic criticisms cannot be calmed down by persecutions and intimidations. Vatican II in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church emphasized the presence of the Holy Spirit in the whole community and the infallible character of the community (*sensus fidelium*) in matters of faith¹⁶. BCCs have rediscovered this prophetic characteristic of the Church. It discovers the will of God as a community by mutual sharing and prayer. And once they discover the will of God, they are committed to it, and are ready to take any risk for it that they often become a *Church of martyrs* or a *suffering Church*.

A new ecclesial model

The Church as the sign and sacrament of salvation consists of the visible sign and the invisible gift of salvation. The visible sign or the historical form and structures of the Church were not given by Christ or the Apostles as ready-made and fixed once for all, but they were the product of history, and as such they are subject to change. A small minority of the clergy at the apex of the ecclesial pyramid controlled everything in the Church, produced everything in the Church - doctrines, theology, worship, law etc. The vast majority of the members of the Church turned to be mere spectators and recipients without having any active role in the Church.

The new ecclesial model presented by BCCs may be described as a *Peoples Movement Model* rather than institutional, and a *Communion Model* rather than hierarchical. Communion and participation are its characteristics

16. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 12

BCCs are a peoples movement where the entire people are involved. They become aware that they are the Church and that the Church belongs to everyone. In this model the Church is a fellowship or communion. There decisions are taken by the whole community in the light of the Word of God and worship is not ready-made and conducted exclusively by the clergy, but is a creative work of the entire community which celebrates it. BCCs are a Church which is wholly ministerial. Ministry belongs to the entire Church or community. Every Christian is a minister of Christ and of the Church by his call and charism. The entire community has a priestly, prophetic and pastoral ministry. The ordained ministers have specific services, but they exercise it not independently of the community. They are not above or outside the community. The elders or presbyters of the early Church exercised such a ministry of leadership and co-ordination until they happened to be priests as a result of the development of sacerdotalism in the Church.

A threat to unity or hope for the future ?

Is the emergence of BCCs a threat to the unity of the Church, or a sign of hope for the future? BCCs are new ecclesial models and structures and they seem to challenge the traditional structures of the parish and diocese. BCCs are organized, guided and co-ordinated mostly by laymen and women; they are churches of the people. They seem or are deemed to threaten the authority of the hierarchy and the clergy who used to manage the Church by monopolizing all authority in the Church. Certainly, there are tensions between BCCs and the institutional Church. But these tensions can be overcome by reorganizing the parish and the diocese and by a theological understanding of the authority in the Church. Parishes and dioceses could be seen and reorganized as the focal points for the fellowship or communion of the BCCs among themselves. Role of the hierarchy and their authority in the Church should be seen as a service to the community than an exercise of independent sacred power. Hierarchy in the Church has the responsible task of linking BCCs to the Apostolic Church and its heritage.

Other possible dangers in connection with BCCs are a kind of Biblical fundamentalism, secularism, exclusivism or sectarianism, communalism and particularism. Lack of proper guidance in the reading and study of the Bible might lead to a superficial, literary and fundamentalistic interpretation and understanding of the Bible. Therefore BCCs must be constantly on the watch against these possible dangers by deepening their faith, by theological updating and by a linking among themselves under the guidance of bishops, who are the visible sign of fellowship, continuity and unity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Before concluding this brief study on the contemporary movement or phenomenon of Basic Christian Communities, I would like to pose a question: In a country like India where Christians are only a small minority of two percent and the vast majority of the population belongs to other religions, creeds and ideologies, should the Church in India be involved in organizing Basic *Christian* Communities or Basic *Human* Communities? The South American model of the BCC where the entire life of the community is organized on an ecclesial basis is not a viable model for India. The Christian communities in India should not be closed, exclusive communities. They must be open communities where all people in each place, irrespective of religion, caste, creed and ideology, are brought together and *basic human communities* are formed. Christian communities (BCCs) must make bridges between different religions, castes and cultures. Our final goal is the formation of basic human communities where common life-styles, common strategies for the liberation of the Indian masses, and inter-religious approaches to the basic human problems and questions must be developed. The formation of BCCs in India should be only a first step towards the renewal of Christian life and towards the creation of basic human communities. In the emergence of BCCs one can rightly see a ray of hope for the future of the Church and of society.

Action Groups and Church Mission Today

1. Action group phenomenon as social protest

Social protest has been a part of our society for quite some time. G.A. Oddie, in his book on *Social Protest in India*¹, firmly asserts that it has been an essential part of Indian society, citing instances of protest against widow remarriage, child marriage, sati, etc. as being some of its more articulate expressions in our society. Given the basic truth and legitimacy of Oddie's claims, one cannot but disagree with his further claim that social protest naturally becomes a vehicle and agency of social change. As far as I know social protest *per se* can be neither a vehicle nor an agency of social change. Oddie restricted his examination basically to Protestant christian missionary participation, and at times initiation of protest against existing social institutions. The new action group phenomenon which seems to be presently spreading in the naturally traditional and stringently institutionalised Indian society is perhaps the most articulate expression of the natural disequilibrating forces in our society. However, this particular expression of social protest seems to provide a completely new dimension in the understanding of the ethos of Indian society and the changes taking place in it today. The desire to bring about systemic change tends to become a myth. It has perhaps died the same kind of natural death as the iconoclasm of Marxism. It remains no more than an utopian concept, far removed from the existing reality of the social system. The inherent ideological idealism has now become an expedient avenue for 'operators' to perpetuate their vested interests to the maximum through an astute exploitation of idealism and radicalism. It is now the day of the 'Pseudos' who thrive on the idealism of the few, who themselves are subject to deep-rooted apprehensions and

1. Cf. Oddie G. A., *Social Protest in India, British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reforms. 1850-1900*, Manohar, Delhi 1979.

fears of familial security. These pseudos are in actuality parasitical ideological mercenaries. All this tends to lead to a loss of credibility and a severe disparagement of proper social, and at times, moral accountability of the action groups. The erstwhile Parsonian *Optimisation of gratification* has taken on grotesque proportions.

Oddie's book is perhaps one of the most recent and excellent examinations of social protest in India. However, I have certain basic reservations about his logic, especially, when he tends to create a conceptual confusion between *social protest* and *social reform*, for instance, see some of his statements on p.3 (*op. cit.*). Social protest is basically a natural expression of the disequilibrating forces in society. This may only sometimes lead to social reform; and perhaps eventually to *systemic* change in the social order.

2. Mission of the Church today

I would not like to enter into a theological discussion on the actual conceptualisation of the church. This has been a subject of debate among theologians. However, I would like to point out that the "mission" of the church depends completely on that conceptualisation which we accept.

I am of the firm conviction that the church must somehow be involved in development. This sort of involvement is, to my mind, the cutting edge of the mission of the Church in India. To use the analogy used by Houtart², the churches' involvement in development is the meeting point or point of intersection for the *religious system* to interact with the *economic* and *political* systems in society. The churches' involvement in development is also its new role. Our institutional mission perhaps has lost its relevance. Rapid "institutionalisation" has crippled our institutions. Rampant politicisation has enshrouded them in the debris of empty monolithic structures catering mostly to the elite in society.

2. F. Houtart, *The Development Projects as a Social Practice of the Catholic Church in India*, Centre for Socio-religious Research, Catholic University of Louvain, 1976

The development ministry of the Church is thus the most potent and effective means of our being involved in the power structures of society, with the ultimate intent of transforming them. In this task, the existing development projects have made a good beginning. Economic programmes, even though they are on the border of charity are an excellent point of entry in confrontation with the power structures in society. Radical change is not easily possible in a tradition-bound society like ours. Transformation is possible, and, to my mind, the process has begun. This is encouraging. It is, however, crucial that the churches' involvement in development itself does not create an infrastructure for the emergence of new oppressive forms and power structures. This would defeat the whole purpose of our involvement in society and social transformation. An important aspect of this is the whole power dimension involved. When the church representing a minority of 2.6% of the population can easily generate colossal sums of money in times of natural calamity it is an indication of the 'power' that the church wields. If the development work of the church continues to be on the line of charity and relief there is also the possibility that it might be responsible for building up new and oppressive power structures both within itself and probably in society at large³.

3. Areas of potential accord and discord

The relationship between the action groups and the institutional church (for inadvertent and unfortunate reasons) has deteriorated into one of suspicious ambivalence. The following are some of the areas which need to be thought out carefully if this situation is to be remedied.

(i) The new mission of the church is basically in its essential involvement in society. However, it is this very area which creates a great deal of tension between action

3. Cf. Augustine J. S., "The Rural Development Ministry of the CSI in Tamilnadu", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, Sept, '81, p. 53, CISRS, Bangalore.

groups and the institutionalised Church. I have on purpose chosen to use the term *action groups*. There is a lot of confusion as to what is the best terminology to use for this very important phenomenon emerging today in Indian society. Its name is legion. Suffice it to say that "action groups" is perhaps, the most expedient way of labelling this phenomenon *sans* the overtones of the hackneyed "liberation" theology and the petrified Marxian analysis. All the groups operating today are not necessarily either of Christian origin or of Christian content.

(ii) I would like to submit that an institutionalised conceptualisation of the church completely betrays or camouflages its basic essence. The church should try to shed this institutional image and adopt a more *commensal* complexion. The action groups to a very large extent operate basically on *commensality* rather than on an institutional structure.

(iii) I would have normally submitted that the new mission of the church lies in encouraging and sponsoring effective social action through the existing action groups. This would help bridge the fissures that have emanated in this relationship. The action groups could perhaps have evolved as the new and essential ecclesia. The institutional Church can never itself engage in proper social action given its institutionalised structure which it is reluctant to shed, or perhaps cannot easily do so. However, I have two very strong and basic reservations in making this sort of assertion.

(a) The action groups have inadvertently either allowed themselves, or have been constrained to allow themselves to be grievously exploited.

(b) Because of the severe aloneness of being engaged in effective social action there is the danger of a disparegament of both spiritual and moral integrity. There have been concrete instances of this.

There is a dire need, and a great creative potential in building a new dialectic between the action groups and the institutional Church. Unless this is achieved it cannot claim to be true to the gospel or more so to The Christ.